

**INTIMACY
AND
ETERNITY**

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Prologue

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.
(Ecclesiastes 3:11)

SEVERAL HUNDRED YEARS AGO a book called *L'Abbaye Sans Murs* (The Abbey without Walls) was published. At a time when people who felt drawn to be close to the Lord were expected to withdraw to monasteries or convents, this book took the unusual step of encouraging people to deepen their life of devotion while at the same time remaining fully involved in the world. *Intimacy and Eternity* aims to be a modern-day equivalent, to meet the needs of Christians who are longing to bridge the gap between their desire to be close to the Lord and the comparatively low level of spiritual life they experience most of the time.

Although the ability to remain close to the Lord can only be the work of grace, the Lord can help us to develop frameworks that will aid the flow of His Holy Spirit in our lives. In the process, we shall examine and demystify many of the ways by which the Lord leads the soul on its pilgrimage. Intimacy with God is such an all-embracing theme that I have, of necessity, had to be highly selective in what I have included. I have not, for instance, spent much time considering how our spiritual life is sharpened by the everyday rubbing that comes from normal healthy fellowship. Neither have I attempted to say anything about sacramental approaches to intimacy because the treasure-trove of Christian literature is already full of such teaching.

I have incorporated a number of personal stories, on the assumption that most of us assimilate teaching best when it comes wrapped in real-life experience. Given the very real danger of the reader becoming tired of the ever-present first person pronoun, I hope the snippets I have included will serve in much the same way that scaffolding does during the construction of a building: as an aid to make the main themes accessible.

In all honesty, this is not a book to skim-read. The teaching takes us quickly into topics we will want to ponder deeply and to apply prayerfully. To help us do this I have made each chapter as nearly self-standing as possible, and have included opportunities at the end of each chapter to pause and pray. The key to benefiting from these devotional interludes is to approach them slowly, so that what the Lord shows us may take root in our hearts. I pray that He will draw close to each one of you as you make your way through this inner pilgrimage!

The Path to Intimacy

Let me describe various conditions, and see if they in any way mirror your own experience. You are hungry for God, yet no longer find the fulfilment you once did in the things you used to enjoy so much. You sense a growing dissatisfaction in your spirit. Even worship times have begun to feel shallow and hollow. You are afraid to voice these thoughts in case you sound negative or judgmental – especially since you feel in some ways as though you are bearing less fruit now than you once were. You are at a loss to know why this should be the case, since your desire to meet with the Lord remains as strong as it has ever been. Be reassured! This longing to know God better, combined with a certain inner discontent, is a necessary prelude to going deeper with Him. As we shall see, wilderness times have a crucial role to play in the development of the soul. Others of you, by contrast, are seeking the Lord with eagerness and expectation for Him to show you the next step in your life. You are aware that He is stirring you up, urging you to broaden

your horizons, and to branch out into some new sphere of service.

Which of these categories most nearly speaks to your condition: an inner discontent with the spiritual status quo? A longing to escape from the rut you feel you are in? Or a great excitement in your heart because the Lord is leading you in new ways and making you more open and receptive to His promptings? These are just some of the starting points God may be using to draw you into a more rounded intimacy with Himself.

For Reflection

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are! . . . What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

(1 John 3:1-2)

The Lord's leading is both sure and surprising. Is it not delightful to consider the stages by which He led men such as Moses, Peter and Paul to a deeper knowledge of Himself? Their early years afforded little or no indication of all the Lord would accomplish through them in later life. We never know what we will become in Him – but the more we seek Him now, the easier He will find it to lead us tomorrow.

Selah

Lord, You are calling me to live closer to Your heart. Prepare me to be able to do this. As I read these chapters and meditate on their themes, set my heart free to hear what You are saying to Me. Warm me to that which is important for me to understand. Free me from my prejudices and inspire me to be more open to the promptings of your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Part One

The River of Delights

The moment I realized that God existed, I knew I could not do otherwise than to live for Him alone. (Charles de Foucauld)

CHRISTIAN WRITERS AND PREACHERS through the ages have compared the journey of the soul to a pilgrimage. Whether the imagery is of passing from darkness to light, or from imperfection to a greater degree of perfection, many have found that the Lord takes us through different stages on our journey to eternity.

Some years ago we went as a family for a wonderful walk in the Lake District. The path led beside a river that sparkled in the morning sunshine. The fragrant smells of a particularly fine spring brought joy to the heart, even though there were some perilous moments as we scrambled over outcrops of rock above the fast-flowing river. To all intents and purposes, however, we were walking beside a River of Delights.

A mile or so later, the path we were following turned away from the river and headed steeply uphill. Now the way was narrow, hemmed in by the mountains. Several times our youngest child

tripped and fell. This stage of our walk was hard and tedious: a real Ascent of Toil.

Eventually, and not without wondering if we would ever make it, we reached the Broad Open Spaces, high above the tree-line. Here we were rewarded by that special sense of exhilaration one enjoys on the fell tops, the silence that is so complete and yet so invigorating, crisp fresh air and endless panoramas stretching out in all directions.

We can view these different stages of our walk as a parable of the inner life. The River of Delights, the Ascent of Toil and the Broad Open Spaces correspond broadly to the three main phases of our pilgrimage: firstly the Promise, then the Preparation (or Proving) and finally the place of Provision (or Fulfilment).

These stages depict the phases of our pilgrimage so aptly that I have used them as a starting point around which to base much of the teaching in this book. They are not watertight or static stages, of course, such as Childhood, Adolescence and Adulthood, but are cyclical. As we are faithful with one commission, so the Lord leads us on to new and higher callings. These in turn entail further Ascents of Toil, before unfurling into a place of yet greater fruitfulness.

When we first come to know Him, many of us experience an outpouring of God's love. Even though there may be a spate of racing water and alarming situations to negotiate, this flood-tide of initial grace can be likened to a River of Delights. It is a season of special grace and favour, a glorious introduction to the riches of intimacy with God. We shall share much about the pace of life we must set ourselves if we are to experience more of the Lord's presence, and consider the process of spiritual reflection itself. All this runs counter to the prevailing spirit of the world, not least the final emphasis, which explores the particular benefits we will experience through entering the silence where God is to be found.

Since we serve a holy God, who is at least as much concerned with our attitudes as with our actions, it should come as no surprise if we then find ourselves passing through an infinitely more demanding Ascent of Toil. Has it not been the consistent testimony of the saints through the centuries that God uses times of trial to deepen our life of devotion?

Nevertheless, many feel disorientated when the blue skies recede and the honeymoon by the River of Delight comes to an end. We should not be unduly dismayed if we find ourselves passing through deeply unsettling periods, in which nothing flows as smoothly as we had expected, and everything we had been led to believe and hope for appears to be taken from us. When the Lord is about to accomplish something special, He allows us to see the difficulties first. But when He is about to do something magnificent, it usually appears completely impossible!

The onset of an Ascent of Toil, does not necessarily herald years of drudgery ahead. In retrospect, we will look back with gratitude, and realize how much the Lord has accomplished during these difficult periods – provided only that we do not turn back when the going becomes rough.

Such experiences provide us with an ideal starting point for exploring God's purposes in permitting us to go through times of spiritual darkness and confusion. I have lingered long on

these downside times, because we are sure to experience at least some of the ferocious and conflicting emotions that assail the soul when it feels bereft of God's presence.

These particular themes will make more sense to those who have already experienced something of God's dealings with them. For all who are passing through such unnerving times, I pray these chapters may bring both reassurance and fresh insight. For those at an earlier stage of their journey, I pray they may be wholesome preparation for the steeper climb that lies ahead!

Beyond the Ascent of Toil, and beckoning to us, lie the Broad Open Spaces. This is the moment when the reasons for God's hidden dealings with us become clearer, when His promises to us are fulfilled, and the time when we gain great victories of faith. We find ourselves operating with a degree of spiritual freedom and authority we once could only have marvelled at. Even a taste of such anointing refreshes our soul, just as a few hours in the bright sunshine on the fell tops can banish the backlog of long winter days and ease the weight of too many stresses and strains.

Whatever the specific ministries the Lord has entrusted us with – and His commissions are as varied as His people – God wants to share His heart with us, and for us to give Him the love of our hearts. To pursue the ways of eternity and to live in quest of an ever-deepening intimacy with the Lord is an exciting and challenging call: one that will require at least as much courage and determination as we need to fulfil our more secular ambitions. May the Lord give us grace to persevere through our particular Ascents of Toil, so that we may live and move in the power of His Spirit on the Broad Open Spaces of faith, anointing and a yielded heart.

Selah

Praise You, Lord, that You are longing to draw us closer to Yourself. Thank You for the River of Delights when Your presence is so close. Give us courage and freedom from fear when You lead us up the Ascent of Toil. Bring us safely through each testing time until we reach the Broad Open Spaces, where we can sense Your presence and live more fully in the power of Your Spirit and see Your promises fulfilled. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Chapter One

The Longing for Intimacy

How lovely is Your dwelling place O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God — Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere — Blessed is the man You choose and bring near to live in Your courts.
(Psalm 84:1-2, 10; Psalm 65:4)

FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME the Lord has longed to share the riches of eternity with mankind. We see this so beautifully illustrated in the Garden of Eden. Because we could not be acceptable to Him after the Fall, the Lord took the initiative to restore the broken relationship by sending His only Son to Earth to suffer and to die on our behalf.

As His children and heirs we are called to share something of the same depth of intimacy which the Father enjoys with the Son. There is no quota of spiritual encounters we can ever exhaust; no limit to how close we can draw near to Him. It will take us the rest of our lives to appreciate how wonderful He is, and how precious we are to Him. Listen to what the Lord Jesus has promised: *He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I too will love him and show Myself to him. If anyone loves Me he will obey My teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*

All I have is Yours, and all You have is Mine.

I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as we are one.

Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am and to see my glory.

I have made You known to them, and will continue to make You known.

(John 14:21,23;17:10,22,24,26)

How wonderfully the Lord is continuing to make Himself known! If the gift of such intimate friendship had been bestowed in Old Testament days only on a few chosen ones, now it is available for all who will offer themselves unreservedly to His service.

For myself, I am privileged to be able to look back on one specific moment when the largely unrecognized hunger in my heart was transformed into a living friendship with the Lord Jesus. It happened on the final morning of a university mission. I had squeezed into a crowded service at a predominantly student-based church, crouched behind a pillar, and was listening with amazement to the fervent singing of a thousand people worshipping the Lord. This was quite unlike anything I had heard before!

I could not actually see the man who stood up to preach, but his words brought me face to face with the reality of a Kingdom of whose existence I had previously been unaware. The love of God was reaching out to me, convicting me of the lack of any eternal perspective to my life. I returned from that church meeting convinced I had found the One I had always secretly been looking for – but equally determined to say nothing about it to my utterly unchurched flatmate. I was about to meet the God of surprises. As I popped into his room that evening to say good night, I found him earnestly defending Christianity to an atheist friend. He had begun attending

a different church that week, and had also committed his life to the Lord.

When God draws one person to Himself, He often draws others nearby at the same time. My flatmate and I had the joy of learning to pray together: stumbling, ungrammatical utterances offered up late at night, perhaps in the curiously naive assumption that God might have more time to listen to us during off-peak hours! We had everything to learn. What we did discover, almost from day one, was that the Lord was hearing our clumsy efforts to seek Him. We were soon beginning our times of prayer with great thanksgiving for all the answers we were already experiencing. We had embarked on the River of Delights!

God's Desire for Friendship

God has two dwellings, one in heaven, and the other in a meek and thankful heart.
(Izaak Walton)

Life on earth is a doomed and futile quest for meaning and for permanence, until we find and are found by the Saviour of the world. After all, 99.9% of our life (and more) lies ahead of us in eternity! That is where our ultimate home will be.

All the things that have deeply possessed your soul have been but hints – tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear . . . If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world . . . Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.
(C.S.Lewis)¹

I mentioned at the beginning of the book that when people in the past felt the Lord drawing them towards such intimacy, they often withdrew into monasteries and convents. The pull of God's love is so strong that virtually everyone who experiences it will long to seek a more explicitly God-centred existence. To think in terms of monasteries would, for most of us, be a misunderstanding of the nature of the call, which is less to escape from this world than to advance courageously towards another.

In other words, what this book is describing is more an inner drawing towards God than to the cloistered life. The number of people who are called to devote themselves to the monastic life is small. Those who are thus set apart serve as a powerhouse of prayer on behalf of the whole Church. Their task is a difficult as well as a privileged one. Most of us must learn to develop Mary's heart of devotion, even while the practical necessities of life oblige us to embrace Martha's serving role in the world.²

The usual word that people use to describe this deepening awareness that God is drawing them closer to Himself is contemplation. When I first came across this word, I had very little idea of what it meant. I was not greatly enlightened to read that 'contemplation is a steady and quiet infusing of the love of God.' I think I was left wondering whether it had something to do with brewing tea!

I have come, by stages, to appreciate more of what it signifies. To be able to look to the Lord, and

receive His love, will prove more beneficial for the well-being of our soul than the sudden ecstasies and experiences that pass so quickly, and which can leave us feeling so flat in their aftermath.

Contemplation is the quiet fruit of a devotion which persists in the face of the inevitable tides and currents of life, all of which make our awareness of God so different from one day to the next. It is the regular seeking after Him that enables us to bring His presence to those we meet in our daily lives.

I still hesitate to use the term ‘contemplation,’ however, because for many of us it conjures up images of mindless navel-gazing, or Buddhist mantras. Because of the enemy’s subtle counterfeits, it is worth stressing that what I am describing in this book has nothing to do with some mindemptying Nirvana-like pursuit of selfish, illusory bliss.³ The truth is that the soul is far from idle when it is reflecting on God; it is about its Master’s business. There is nothing more precious we can give to our Lord than our time, our availability and our love.

The saints through the centuries testify to the reality of a state of grace that can be reached through such contemplation. What I am seeking to do is to make this accessible to all, by unbolting the doors that have kept us from the riches of these other streams of the faith.

What I do not want to do is to raise any false expectations that life should consist of an endless sequence of glorious visions and ecstasies. Neither am I advocating such a ‘pally’ attitude to the Lord that we forget that He is our judge as well as our friend. If we are to be sure of God’s approval and protection in the sometimes perilous world of spiritual experiences, we need to soak ourselves in the Bible. The Word of God must be the bedrock and the yardstick by which we judge all Christian doctrine and experience.

As a deliberate generalization, we might claim that the evangelicals have reminded the whole Church that the Lord Jesus is the Saviour of the world, and that the Word of God must be central to our faith. The Pentecostals and the charismatics have rightly stressed the importance of the Holy Spirit, and restored anointed worship and the appropriate use of spiritual gifts to the life of the Church. But the Lord is longing for His people to know Him too as Father. It is this contemplative strand of encounter which complements and completes the evangelical and charismatic emphases. It enriches every part of our ministry, and, in turn, makes us more able to minister to others in the power of the Spirit.

Hungry for God

Though we cannot know God, we can love Him: by love He may be touched and embraced . . . In anticipation of this eternal glory, God will sometimes inflame the senses of His devout friends with unspeakable delight and consolation even here in this life. And not just once or twice, but perhaps very often as He judges best. This delight, however does not originate outside the person, entering through the windows of the faculties, but wells up from an excess of joy and true devotion of spirit . . . Some people experience a measure of consolation almost always, while others only rarely. But God in His great wisdom determines what is best for each one.
(The Cloud of Unknowing)

There was a time when I would have thought it a luxury to dwell on the need to deepen my devotional life when there were such crying needs all around. In my early days of faith, I considered that nothing mattered if it did not serve to reach the unchurched. My longing for the lost was a genuine passion – and it is an emphasis which many of us perhaps need to recover. I have come to realize, however, that the Lord Jesus desires friends as well as labourers; those who will devote to Him not only what they do, but also the love of their hearts.

Have you noticed that the psalmist prayed *Bless the Lord, O my soul!* (Psalm 103:1) rather than ‘Bless my soul, O Lord’? Such is the difference between those who would seek to ‘use’ God to fulfil their own needs, and those who simply desire to make themselves available to Him. Such a desire is a sign that we are moving from merely believing in Him to knowing Him, and from knowing Him to truly loving Him.

For those brought up on a strong work-ethic, be reassured: this call to a life of devotion is not an excuse for idleness. When men and women truly meet with God, action of one kind or another will always follow – but it will be inspired action rather than uncommanded works. There need be no false dichotomy between those who pray and those who do. History testifies that it has been those who have prayed most who also accomplish most.⁴ The Lord will send us out again and again into unexpected areas of service, to share such love and understanding as we ourselves have received. The destiny of many others is bound up in the work we do and in the prayers we pray. Before the Lord Jesus sent the disciples out to minister for Him, He appointed them first to be with Him.⁵ Although the Lord longs to make us effective ambassadors for His Kingdom, He would also have us rediscover the ability just ‘to be’ in His presence.

David Watson, the preacher who helped me find the Lord during the service I mentioned earlier, is a case in point. David had taken over a church in York that was on the verge of closure, but, through prayer and faithful preaching, transformed it into one of the most thriving congregations in the country. He was an immensely gifted evangelist.

When he was dying from the last stages of an advanced cancer, the Lord spoke to him, not as a rebuke but as a reminder of His priorities: ‘All your writing and all your preaching are as nothing compared to your relationship with Me.’⁶ This is a challenge to us all. If it is indeed our relationship with the Lord that is the most important thing, then let’s not wait until we are on our death beds before we take it seriously!

By God’s mercy we are the successors to an unnamed but glorious company of people through the ages who have embraced intimacy with their Creator, and experienced in this life the reality of His eternity. We will experience this intimacy more fully as we take the truths of Scripture into our hearts. We shall encounter it in the love and care that people lavish on us, discern it on the faces of those who love to be in God’s presence, perceive it in the beauties of His creation, delight in it through the words of the glorious hymns of faith, and rejoice in it as the Spirit transforms our meetings into encounters with the living God. May the quest for such intimacy be our lifelong passion!

For Reflection

As we begin to explore what it means to be close to the Lord, think for a moment of people you

have met whose lives reflect their love for the Lord. Each of us will know at least some of these saints, in our locality, if not within our own family. However much their career may or may not amount to in the world's eyes, their inner being reveals a living awareness of eternity that makes us hunger for more of God's presence in our own lives.

You might find it helpful to write a prayer to the Lord, asking Him to fill you with that same single-minded love. Tell Him where you feel you are in your relationship with Him, both in relation to where you used to be, and to where you would like to be.

Selah

Thank You, Lord, for putting this longing in my heart to know You better. Thank You for calling me to be Your friend and for including me in Your eternal purposes. Help me to seek You when nobody else can see me just as much as when I am in the great congregation.

I love You more than words could ever say, and I welcome You at the outset of this day. I give You all my wounds and hurts, all feelings of inferiority and stumbling stones of pride. I want my heart and home to be a garden wherein You walk, and a furnace of love for those who are in need. So come afresh with Your cleansing power, to disperse the clouds of doubt and gloom and release the fragrance of Your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

1.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins Fount). Used with permission.

2.

Luke 10:38-42.

3.

It is not wrong to embark on this path with caution. Contemplation must be practised within a safe, secure and accountable environment, where all is firmly based on the Word of God. This is important, since a terrible deception has infiltrated a sizeable section of the contemporary Christian contemplative scene. Mystical influences from Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism (an Islamic offshoot) have become popular, promoting a universalist viewpoint that is at complete variance with the teaching of Scripture. Please do not think that I am tarring all such institutions with the same brush, but this is a tremendously serious situation. Souls are being led far from the true focus of their faith by calling on deities that are, in reality, dark and dangerous powers. See 'The Challenging Counterfeit' in my book *Ravens and the Prophet* (New Wine Press).

4.

Martin Luther declared he was so busy that he dared not pray for less than three hours a day concerning his many activities. John Wesley likewise lived what he preached by rising early each morning in order to spend quality time seeking God. So too did the Lord Jesus!

5.

Mark 3:14-15. The word 'appointed' in Greek means 'to make someone into something.'

6.

David Watson, *Fear No Evil* (Hodder and Stoughton).

Chapter Two

The Pace of Life

All our life is like a day of celebration for us; we are convinced, in fact, that God is always everywhere. We work while singing, we sail while reciting hymns, we accomplish all other occupations of life while praying.

(Clement of Alexandria)

AS WE SET OFF ON OUR WALK in the Lake District beside the river, we were aware of a deep desire within us to draw closer to the Lord. Within minutes of putting on our walking boots and striding into the woods that bordered the river we felt our spirits lifting. It was a refreshing change from the pressures of the past few months. I little realized that it was also about to become a way of life for us.

The Lord invites His people to walk by the River of Delights – but many of us find that busyness makes life feel more like a Torrent of Turbulence! As we return from a busy day, swallow a hasty meal and then head off for yet another engagement, what opportunity do we have to ponder, let alone to implement the insights we have gleaned from earlier sermons, tapes and books? It is hardly surprising that many of us become spiritually numb, going through the motions outwardly, but with all too little heart conviction. Scripture certainly encourages us to meet together, but we dare not measure our spiritual well-being by the number of meetings we attend or lead.

If we are to experience more of the presence of the Lord, we must pay considerable attention to the pace at which we lead our lives. So many of us suffer from the ravages of too much outward stress that is offset by too little physical exercise for the body, and insufficient spiritual nourishment for our inmost being. Even though we may be able to keep our professional mask more or less in place, our inmost being may be yearning for the renewing touch that comes from spending time with our Heavenly Father. We are wise if we heed this cry of the heart because we burn out inwardly faster than we do outwardly.

Developing Romance

Aspire to God with short but frequent outpourings of the heart; admire His bounty; invoke His aid; cast yourself in spirit at the foot of His cross; adore His goodness . . . give Him your whole soul a thousand times in the day.

(Francis de Sales)¹

As world events accelerate headlong into unexpected scenarios, we are left catching our breath at the speed at which change is sweeping the globe. New and often unstable nation-states have appeared almost overnight on the political map, even as a powerful move of God's Spirit has brought entirely new dimensions of spiritual freedom to many parts of the Church.

Through all the change and shaking, the desire of the Lord remains constant: for an intimacy with His people that develops through a lifetime of seeking Him. Romance cannot thrive on occasional contact. The Lord wants to renew a sense of adventure in our walk with Him. The hand of the Lover is poised on the latch of our hearts, and He bids us come forth and follow Him.² Dare we refuse His gracious advances? If we remain too engrossed in our own pursuits –

not to mention our comforts – our love weakens and His heart saddens.

Because Christians are usually amongst the most willing of all people to serve, we may experience particular difficulty in adjusting the pace of our lives. Yet if we rush to action stations to meet every need that comes our way, we may end up scrimping on our times with the Lord and with our families. Above all, we must seek to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading.

If too many church activities can bring their own strains, the sheer amount of television most of us watch can also stunt our spirits and hinder our attempts to draw closer to the Lord. 'TV or not TV': that will often be the question we must ask ourselves! Why is it that so many Christians flop for hours at a time in front of the box without checking whether God is happy for them to watch that particular programme? How much richer would it be if they took time to reflect and even to pray about the things they have just watched and heard?

I am concerned, too, for the pace of life our leaders and politicians are expected to adopt. The schemes they devise have such far-reaching effects on people's lives – but who will show these absurdly busy people how to set time apart to weigh and ponder the different options that lie before them?

The French have coined a phrase that epitomizes the soul-deadening nature of so much of modern commuter life: 'Metro, boulot, dodo'. It means you take the Tube to work, you do your nine hours at work and then you make your way to bed. Given that most of us have to earn our living within this far from ideal framework, we urgently need to find ways to restore romance and adventure in our walk with the Lord.

The Sabbath Day Principle

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest.

(Hebrews 4:9,11)

In Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 we find repeated exhortations to enter God's Sabbath rest. These verses refer less to dutiful Sabbath observance than to that quality of rest from our labours which enables our weary bodies to be refreshed and our souls to be recharged.

A famous biologist once commented, 'It is necessary to be slightly under-employed if we are to do anything significant.' Unstructured time (that is, free of demanding schedules) can help us develop an eternal perspective on life – but only if we approach them in the right spirit.

When the Lord ordained the Sabbath as a day of rest He was modelling a pattern for man's well-being. During the Second World War, many schemes were tried to discover which pattern would best aid the war effort. The results were conclusive: six days on and one off proved the most effective!

Although Sabbath-day observance as such is less important today than it was under the old dispensation, the principle remains true – as do the consequences of ignoring it! Just as the tithe belongs to God by right (our offerings beginning above and beyond this point) perhaps it would

be helpful to view the institution of the Sabbath – that is one day off a week – as God’s minimum requirement.

If busyness reduces our relationship for a season to little more than telling God that we love Him, and calling on Him for help, there need be no cause for concern. ‘Provided the intention remains firm,’ wrote Teresa of Avila, ‘my God is not in the least meticulous . . . In drawing up our reckoning, he is not in the least exacting, but generous.’³

Time and again the Lord condenses much wisdom and direction into a hasty reading of *Living Light, The Word for Today* or our other Bible notes. The danger comes when unusual times of pressure become the norm, and we reduce our diet to suit our hectic lifestyle. Just as there is a world of difference between fast food and gourmet fare, so we will need to adjust the pace of our life to avoid living exclusively on a diet of spiritual snacks.

The Burning Desire

The access to Heaven is through desire . . . The path to Heaven is measured by desire and not by miles.

(The Cloud of Unknowing)

Beyond good intentions, to grow in intimacy with the Lord we need a strong desire. In post-Freudian thought, ‘desire’ is usually considered to be unfulfillable. It witnesses to the absence of all absolutes – especially God! But the Lord has placed this longing for intimacy deep within us not to tantalize us but to reassure us that the presence of God is the proper end and fulfilment of desire.

Augustine considered there to be no greater sin than indifference, while Frederick Faber described the lack of desire as ‘the ill of all ills’. Desire enables us to overcome all manner of daunting circumstances, first to experience, and then to preserve, intimacy with God.

I recently came across a biography of a woman who had been bedridden from childhood, and blind and deaf for the greater part of her life. Faced with almost endless time stretching ahead of her, Jane Hess Marchant fought enormous battles against self pity. As she wrote to a friend, ‘It isn’t an easy foe to overcome, even when we know the remedy.’ Jane bore her disabilities bravely and wrote poems that were treasured right across America. Something of her resilient attitude is captured in this poem, *The Sacrifice of Praise*:

If we would offer praise to God continually,
Our hearts must sacrifice some things that seem to be peculiarly dear;
The pleasures of complaining when little things go wrong and little hurts are paining;
The joy of feeling abused, and envious of our neighbours,
And sorry for ourselves and our unrequited labours;
The pride of pointing out the small defects that mar our satisfactions,
to prove how skilled in taste we are –
All this the heart intent on offering praise forgoes;
And sacrificing, finds all freedom and repose.
And yet by some perverse and curious mistake
It seems a sacrifice our hearts are loath to make.

Jane found that it was praise alone which kept the power of Satan's negativity at bay, and which enabled the breadth of her vision to scan the world from the narrow confines of her bedroom. As her fame increased, however, so too did the interruptions. She found herself desperately short of time for what she called 'slow interior living.'

Ponder some more of her words:

The dream within the heart,
 the shape within the stone,
Is visualized apart,
 is realized alone.
No one who would express essentials,
 can exclude the arduous inwardness,
 the searching solitude.⁴

The temptation is to assume that we will never have time to enjoy the richer fare this reference to 'arduous inwardness' is clearly calling us to. Clergymen point to their impossibly busy round of activities; parents wrestle with never-ending piles of clearing up – and everybody knows the stresses that affect the workplace.

If excuses are the order of the day, I suspect that even the hermit in his cave might find the lack of central heating – or the presence of too many bats – reason enough to stop seeking God. It sounds so much more plausible to say 'Circumstances prevent me,' rather than 'The cost is too great.'

What will really hinder us from seeking the Lord, even more than a lively child or a demanding job, is the lack of desire. When we are really eager to do something, it is amazing how much effort and ingenuity we can devote to making it possible.

Not only do most people struggle to find time for the 'searching solitude' Jane Hess Marchant was describing: they may also be surprised how hard it can be to cope with if they do succeed in finding it! It takes maturity to handle unstructured time, whether it comes our way as a consequence of redundancy, illness, retirement or the Lord's specific leading. But God will not share His richest blessings with those who are harbouring hopes of finding something better in their worldly pursuits. May the Lord renew a burning desire in us to honour Him in all that we do. As Faber wrote,

None honours God like the thirst of desire . . .
Then pray for desire, for love's wistfullest yearning,
For the beautiful pining of holy desire;
Yes, pray for a soul that is ceaselessly burning
With the soft fragrant flames of this
Thrice happy fire. For the heart only dwells,
Truly dwells with its treasure,
And they who love God cannot love Him by measure,
For their love is but hunger to love Him still better.
For the lack of desire is the ill of all ills;

God loves to be longed for, He loves to be sought,
For He sought us Himself with such longing and love:
He died for desire of us, marvellous thought!
And He yearns for us now to be with Him above.⁵

Making the Most of our Time

Prayers that first recall and then transform circumstances require a settled spirit and a firm purpose. Whatever our personal circumstances, we will need to *make* time to wait on the Lord. The nature of our diaries (to say nothing of the subtle distractions the enemy sends our way) mean that we will almost never be able to *find* enough time to be with Him.

If this means choosing not to go somewhere interesting of an evening in order to spend more time in God's presence, then so be it. We are almost bound to disappoint more actively minded friends from time to time by our choices, but true devotion, like true creativity, cannot be rushed.

If our desire is strong enough (and most of us have to struggle to overcome the fear that we are not the sort of person that God would reveal Himself to) there are usually practical steps that we can take. Mothers can arrange baby swaps, and carers can ask friends to look after aged relatives for a few hours so that they can spend some time with the Lord.

The wife of a busy executive, who used to enjoy more time than her husband did to be with the Lord, shared the spiritual 'manna' she had gleaned during the day with him at the end of the day. This was not 'spoon-feeding' him so much as taking advantage of her privileged position to bless and strengthen her husband. Neither was it an exclusive service for his benefit. She frequently received helpful insights for the many other people she prayed for.

Suddenly their roles reversed. Some years before her husband lost his high-powered job, she had started a business, which in time became a successful enterprise. It is delightful to see her husband serving her today as humbly as she once served him.

For us personally, the challenge to *make the most of every opportunity*⁶ became a much more pressing issue when our children were born. Before their arrival, friends warned us with that peculiar negativity that is so characteristic of the English, 'You wait till you have children! That'll be the end of your long quiet times.' Truth to tell, the arrival of our first child did little to hinder our devotions. We were still able to enjoy our morning quiet time because Ruth slept well, and we were able to backpack her while we went for walks. It was a different story when Timothy arrived. The lightest of sleepers in the morning (and the latest at night) we endured four years of our son waking up the moment we tiptoed out of bed.

Overnight, our devotional pattern was shattered. Now, instead of hopping effortlessly into a car to go in search of a family walk, it really would have been a great deal easier not to go through the paraphernalia of sorting out a carload of children and a lively dog. Yet the blessings that came from doing so repaid our efforts many times over.

We often used to spend some time together walking as a family, before one or other of us would stride on ahead (or linger behind) to drink in the presence of the Lord while the other stayed with

the children. Then we reversed the roles, thus enabling us both to enjoy some time alone with God, whilst also having family time together. In similar ways we managed to turn holidays into mini-retreats. This is important because we have found that God often speaks to us while we are on holiday, perhaps because we are free from our normal responsibilities, and therefore relaxed enough to be able to enjoy richer times of reflection with Him.

Most of us can probably do more than we are currently doing to combine leisure times with devotional interludes without rocking the family boat too much. We should certainly be careful to choose holidays that will do us good spiritually as well as physically.

Bringing Intimacy into our Daily Lives

It is an old custom of the servants of God to have some little prayers, and to be frequently darting them up to Heaven during the day, lifting their minds to God out of the mire of this world. He who adopts this plan will get great fruits with little pains.

(Philip Neri)⁷

As a rule, the busier our lives and ministries, the greater our need to compensate for the stresses and strains. Whatever framework we base our devotional life around should cater both for the objective pressures of our lifestyle and the subjective way in which we respond to stress. Our strengths are as varied as our giftings, and we need to heed our limitations. The parents of very young children, for example, should probably not be expected to shoulder the same burdens they did before they had children – and will again be able to do when the most intensive years of child-rearing lie behind them.

There is a rhythm and a flow in the life of the spirit within us which becomes increasingly familiar to those who take the trouble to recognize the patterns of the Lord's leading. Throughout the long monastic tradition, monks and nuns have realized the wisdom of dividing the day into various sectors, for work, rest and prayer. These well thought-out divisions were designed to bring balance into their lifestyle.

Perhaps we should add to the monastic division of work, rest and prayer the equally important dimension of play. God wants us to enjoy life, and to live it to the full. Times of genuine pleasure and relaxation are a wonderful defence against the work of Satan. The Lord reminded me one day, 'When I created children with an instinct to play, I put something of Myself in them. If you do not play, My child, you are off balance!' Half an hour later we were enjoying each other's company picking blackberries in the autumn sunshine, and feeling much the better for it. To quote again the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

Anyone who has the light to understand what I mean, and the grace to follow it will experience the delight of the Lord's playfulness. For like a father frolicking with his children, He will hug and kiss one who comes to him with a child's heart.

Wherever did we get the idea from that God wants to stop us having fun? He wouldn't have created the elephant's trunk and the giraffe's neck or made new born animals leap and skip unless they were in some way reflecting His own sense of joy and good humour. Let us fear only to make His heart sad by our doubt and unbelief.

The pressures of life are so great today, however, that many people turn for help to a wide range of relaxation therapies. We must choose our means of unwinding carefully. All too many practitioners who promote relaxation techniques have adopted New Age methods and beliefs. Hidden within these lies the ultimate deception of all: that the self is divine. To embrace this view of life is as absurd as the medieval belief that the sun revolves around the earth, but it is becoming alarmingly widespread. Exercise is useful, though, because it reduces stress levels which have become clogged with too much adrenaline and harmful cortisol. Walking is still in many ways the best, and most readily available means of exercise that we can take. So why not combine necessary times of recreation with opportunities to meet the Lord?

Stress sabotages the instinct to play. We live in a society that is so steeped in ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ that most of us feel uneasy if we are not doing as much as we feel we are capable of – and preferably being seen to be doing it! If our mind has become stuck along lines of performing and achieving, I have a strong suspicion that we may never be able to do or achieve enough to satisfy our inner expectations.

Our church programmes unwittingly perpetuate this way of thinking. We push prospective pastors through academically oriented courses, paying far too little attention to developing the kind of character that will fare well on the spiritual front-line. Performance-instructed pastors in turn risk becoming demanding leaders, more obsessed with numbers present than with the overall quality of spiritual life. How can we escape the conclusion that we serve the Lord best by being frenetically busy? Meetings can be vitally important – but our standing with the Lord derives more from how much we love and are obeying Him than from what we are doing for Him.

Yes, there is a world which desperately needs to hear of His salvation, but there is a beauty about someone who has paid the price to be holy, which in turn helps others to draw closer to the Lord. This is not an easy balance to achieve. We must be willing to make whatever adjustments are necessary in our lifestyle to bring about a better spiritual balance.

For Reflection

Given the time constraints that we face, most of us will readily identify with the sentiments expressed in this meditation by Michel Quoist.

Lord, here we are . . . Caught between the infinity of our desires and the limitation of our means, torn, pulled here and pulled there, confused and exhausted.

So Lord, here we are, finally still, and finally ready to listen. You’ve seen how dissatisfaction has made us suffer. You’ve seen how fear has led us astray in choosing our commitments. You’ve seen how we were afraid of doing too little. And You’ve seen the cross imposed by our limited means.

Lord, make us strong enough to do what we should do calmly, simply, without wanting to do too much, without wanting to do it all ourselves. In other words, Lord, make us humble in our wish and Your will to serve. Help us above all to find You in our commitments. For You are the unity of our actions; You are the single love in all our loves, in all our efforts. You are the wellspring, and all things are drawn to You. So we have come before You, Lord, to rest and gather strength.⁸

Selah

Lord and Father of my soul, I ask that I may live my life at such a pace that my faith may be both more comprehensive and more fulfilling. Grant me the ability to structure my days in such a way that there is time to meet with You, and to dedicate the things I do to You.

Thank You that I am here this day on assignment for You. You know what I will do, and whom I will meet. I pray that You will give me the grace, the wisdom, and the compassion and the patience to help me bring Your presence to these people and places.

Keep me from acting impulsively or from under the influence of false compulsions. Balance the pace of my life so that I am neither dilatory nor idle but truly in step with your Spirit.

I give You the matters which are troubling me, especially

I ask you to deal with these worries and to turn them into moments of encounter and breakthrough.

I dedicate my times of travelling to You. May Your presence and Your protection go with me, and make them fresh opportunities for seeking You.

I pray for my friends and family today. Show me how You would have me pray for them, and help me to meet their special needs.

I give you the items of news which have caught my attention, especially and . . .

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In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Chapter Three

Towards a Life of Reflection

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in the world is to 'see' something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who

can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, all in one.
(John Ruskin)

ROSALIND AND I found ourselves praying for many people as we walked along beside the river. This often happens when we take time out to be with the Lord. He uses many of the places we visit, and the sights we see, to remind us of people in need of prayer support.

At the heart of Marcel Proust's monumental work *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*¹ is the discovery of what he termed 'les associations.' Proust observed how a particular smell, sight, or touch could trigger an association with some long-gone experience. For Proust, this led him inexorably backwards into the perceived security of childhood.²

By the River of Delights, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts in a similar, though altogether richer way. The difference is that when the Lord shows us something it leads not to nostalgia but to inspired understanding. He too may use sights, smells, and other associations to remind us of someone who is in need of our prayers. Equally, He may bring some past experience to mind as a means of supplying us with the key to a particular problem.

This is the value of adjusting the pace of our lives. The Lord uses this process of reflection to direct our spirits towards issues that are on His heart. 'The real prophets of our day,' wrote Richard Foster, in his excellent book *Freedom of Simplicity*, 'are those who can perceive what is happening in modern society, see where it will lead us, and give a value judgement upon it . . . We should not just absorb facts, but think about their significance.'³

Reflection enables us to trace and discern patterns where others see only isolated events. It is especially reassuring when the Lord alerts us to difficulties that only He could have known about. The other night, for example, I felt a prompting to lay aside the book I was reading and to pray. The thought came immediately: 'Ring so-and-so and tell her to stop tormenting herself on account of such-and-such.' This simple word served to release the person concerned from a severe internal agitation.

It is wonderful how the Lord alerts His people at times when we ourselves are in special need of help. Times without number we have felt like whales stranded on the shore, when someone has got in contact and 'floated' us off again through their prayers. May the Lord make us more open to such promptings!

Cultivating the Life of Reflection

The Lord is training us first to recognize and then to act on His leadings. In practice, this may be a two stage process. There is a risk of becoming so excited because God is speaking to us that we inadvertently curtail a time of intimacy that might have yielded further insights had we remained a while longer in prayer. Then we have to decide what to do with what we have received. Should we visit the person who came to mind, or pray for them?

Whilst it would be ludicrous to identify all unexpected thoughts as coming from God, it would be equally as foolish not to be open to the possibility that some, at least, are the result of a true spiritual prompting. With practice, we become more skilled at recognizing that the gentle nudges

and reminders which come our way are often the Lord's way of alerting us to do something, or to pray for someone.

There are times when these nudges come so thick and fast that, like aeroplanes coming in to land at a busy airport, I need to 'stack' them until I can give them my full attention. I have been playing the piano in a moment's break from writing these lines, letting my spirit improvise. The music takes now one turn, now another, and people begin to stand before me in prayer: a couple who have just had their first child; a friend who is about to preach for the first time; a woman who is struggling with being single; the Church in Nepal where believers are divided in the aftermath of persecution. Where did all these thoughts come from? It was by taking time out to reflect in the Lord's presence that the Spirit led me in the paths of intercession.

Sometimes I drive through a town or a region and find myself identifying with some of the people who live there; perhaps remembering times we have shared together in the past. These people are watchmen for their region. It is a blessing to know that they are there. Their prayers live on and it is a joy to pray for them.

The Lord has other, more esoteric, ways of alerting us to pray. I went up to greet someone once in a park, mistaking him for someone else. Rather than feeling embarrassed by my mistake, I put it to good use by praying for the person I had been reminded of. It was a simple matter to check back and discover that the person I thought I had seen had indeed needed prayer at that particular moment.

Many similar experiences have taught me to recognize that God uses 'look-alikes' as one of His many ways to call me to pray. It may only be a fleeting resemblance in a certain profile, but it is enough to alert my spirit. I have known other occasions when a certain make or colour of car has been drawn to my attention, again to remind me of someone I know who drives a similar model.

Do such coincidences really come from God? I have found from checking back that in perhaps three-quarters of the cases these people were in obvious need of prayer. Sometimes I was going ahead in the Spirit to open up some new area of service for them or to keep them from some danger. In any case, how can anything but good come from lifting people before the throne of grace? It is precious just to bathe the person who has come to mind in loving prayer, whether or not they are facing any particularly pressing needs.

To pray in this way is to become aware of the deeper workings of the Holy Spirit within our soul. It enables us to share in what God is doing now, today, and tomorrow. It is about healing old hurts, opening new doors, and shaping the future: something which is incalculably richer than the empty nostalgia Proust experienced. Nostalgia reflects man's weary search for permanence in a ceaselessly changing world. We need not share the world's anxiety over the passing of time, for time will soon merge into eternity, and our heavenly home is even now being prepared.

Taking Time to Reflect

Dr Pierson, the son-in-law of George Mueller, founder of the Bristol orphanages, once visited a minister who had been in hospital for six long months. The doctor ventured to suggest that God may have permitted this illness as the only means by which He could cause this busy man to

listen more to Him. He had hardly left the hospital before the Lord spoke to him: 'You too have been too active for Me, and have not taken enough time to be occupied with Me!' Dr Pierson wrote of this experience:

I resolved to practise what I preached. At the close of each day, I sit for one hour in the quiet of my study, not to speak to the Lord, but to listen to what He has to say to me, and to lay the day's life and work open to the Lord's penetrating gaze and appraisal.⁴

Many of us, like Dr Pierson, will find the end of the day the best time for doing this. Often I am too tired or emotionally jangled, but the great benefit of attempting such a review is that it gives us a second chance to ponder the events of the day and the nudges that the Lord has sent our way. We can 'replay' them, almost as if we were watching them pass before our eyes on a video.

Then, as we are reminded of opportunities we have missed, or unkind words that we have uttered, we can 'press the pause button', and deal with the issue God has highlighted.

As we make time to reflect, things that people have said to us return to our consciousness. Words of encouragement that confirm we are on the right path; or words of warning and correction that save us from error – half-warnings even, that we might have missed had we been too engrossed in our own affairs. Apart from anything else, this practice helps us to face painful issues we might otherwise have been inclined to bury.

Keeping a spiritual journal of God's dealings with us can also aid this process of reflection. Rather than merely recording the outward events of the day, we will find it more valuable to record the things the Lord has shown us. Writing down the concerns that are uppermost in our hearts (perhaps in the form of a prayer) crystallizes our thinking and helps us in the future when we face similar situations.⁵

Parables from Nature

The Lord Jesus drew powerfully on the world around Him in His teaching, using spiritual parallels and parables from everyday life: the sower and the seed, the woman who lost a coin, the missing sheep, the unjust judge – these were images that came from a world with which his contemporaries were entirely familiar. We need to be alert to hear what the Spirit may be saying to us. Not infrequently, the Lord will speak to us from the world about us.

Often it will not be new knowledge He conveys to us, so much as the practical application of some known truth, or reassurance about a specific course of action. For example, on our first trip to the Lake District we were intrigued to see a stream whose waters had vanished into the ground, leaving a waterless bed ahead of it. Some distance downstream the waters reappeared.

This phenomenon is known by geographers as a swallow-hole, but to us it spoke about the way in which our spiritual awareness of God often appears to go temporarily underground. There is no need to panic: the bed is all ready and waiting for the water to return further downstream.

The following day provided us with a further example, when we were descending Haystacks, one of our favourite mountains.⁶ Although there was a discernible track to follow through the rocks,

we could only see that portion of it which was immediately in front of us. Whenever we tried to look further ahead we could see no sign of it amongst the crags and boulders. It was another parable of the way in which the Lord leads us: one step at a time along a path that only He can see.

All this is a pointer to the fact that meaning and purpose undergird every part of our life, and that one episode dovetails intricately with others. It is the opposite of the postmodernist concepts of relativity and accident. As we shall be considering in the chapter 'Whispers of His Love', we seek to listen so that we can discern more of the heart and ways of our Lord. Like a skilful investigator we may sometimes have to piece together what God is saying over a particular issue until we feel comfortable to implement a plan, or to pray a certain prayer.

We will need to be free from prejudice, however, if we are to discover what the Lord is saying in a given situation. Although all that God does will be in line with His revealed will in Scripture, our understanding of His Word may be blinkered by our upbringing or by our own desires.⁷ Occasionally, the Lord may give us the special ability to 'know' what needs to be prayed for – much as the prophet Elisha was often aware of things that were happening far away. Elisha was not psychic; he was simply in touch with the Lord who loves (and sometimes needs) to communicate with His children. Elisha used his special knowledge of the enemy commander's plans to save Israel from many enemy forays. Likewise, he knew at once when his servant had fallen into temptation.⁸

I feel the need to add a disclaimer. By placing so great an emphasis on our need to reflect and to listen, I am in no way encouraging us to disregard the minds that the Lord has given us. He is actually extremely concerned to develop our powers of understanding. Nevertheless, in our overly rationalistic age, it is important to pray that the Spirit should inform our mind, rather than to allow our mind to quench and hinder our faith.

For Reflection

I came across a lovely epitaph the other day. It began, 'Remember with Joy.' It is strengthening to remember godly people, as well as those wonderful moments when we have experienced the powers of the age to come breaking through. Bernard of Clairvaux speaks of 'a perfume compounded of the remembered benefits of God'.

Rather than taking God's blessings for granted, let the fragrance of all that Christ has done for you come to mind. Spend some time first recalling, and then writing down, ways by which the Lord has helped and provided for you over the years. Think back not only to major crises, when God has intervened to open or shut doors on your behalf, but also to the smaller steering touches which have made such a difference in your life. Let a goodly number of such examples come to mind and then use these recollections of how good God has been to you as a springboard of faith from which to face the future.

Selah

To help us cultivate a life of reflection, and to become more sensitive to the whispers that flow from God's heart, it is good to consider the day's events in the Lord's presence.

Have I really sought You this day, Lord? Have I withstood temptation? Have I been concerned for

the well-being of those I came into contact with? Have I anything to repent of in the words I have uttered, the thoughts I have entertained, and the things I have done? Have I missed any nudges or burdens that You have sent my way? Train me in the ways of reflection, that Your Spirit can flow more freely through me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Jennifer Rees Larcombe writes helpfully on this subject in *Keeping a Spiritual Journal* (Hodder and Stoughton).

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The celebrated fell walker, Wainwright, suggested that the only advice to give a novice who gets lost in the mist on this particular mountain, is to kneel down and pray for safe deliverance! He also wrote, 'For a man who is trying to get a persistent worry out of his mind, the top of Haystacks is a wonderful cure.'

7.

The Lord had to work hard to convince Peter, against all his instincts, that it was really His will for him to preach the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 10:9-28,34-36). See also my chapters on listening to the Lord in *Ravens and the Prophet* and *Living for the Lord*.

8.

2 Kings 6:8-12; 5:20-27. It is interesting to notice how often the words 'Elisha' and 'king' appear in the same verse. In other words, we are to share the insights the Lord gives us appropriately.

Gems and Treasures

We Christians must simplify our lives or lose untold treasures on earth and in eternity. Modern civilization is so complex as to make the devotional life all but impossible. The need for solitude and quietness was never greater than it is today.

(A. W. Tozer)

We sometimes fear to bring our troubles to God, because they must seem small to Him who sits on the circle of the earth. But if they are large enough to vex and endanger our welfare, they are large enough to touch His heart of love. For love does not measure by a merchant's scales, nor with a surveyor's chain. It has a delicacy unknown in any handling of material substance.

(R. A. Torrey)

Lift up your heart to Him, sometimes even at your meals, and when you are in company; the least little remembrance will always be acceptable to Him. You need not cry very loud; He is nearer to us than we are aware of. . . . We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.

(Brother Lawrence)

Chapter Four

The Trysting Place

Every place is an oratory, every moment a time for prayer . . . Build yourself a cell in your heart and retire there to pray.

(Catherine of Sienna)¹

IN OUR FAVOURITE BOOKS special events often serve to launch the main story. Such an episode occurs at the beginning of C.S. Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, when a picture of a Narnian ship comes alive and draws the children into the 'real' Narnia. Understanding what we call 'Trysting Places' has, for us, been just such a moment of illumination.

Beyond the comforting knowledge that God can be known everywhere, we were making the delightful discovery that He loves to meet us in special ways in places that are dear to both us and Him. It is clear from Scripture that there were certain localities – such as the Mount of Olives – where the Lord Jesus particularly enjoyed being with His Heavenly Father and with His friends on earth.

The walk we went on meant far more to us than just taking some exercise in a spectacularly beautiful part of the Lake District: it was a step on the way to understanding how such places can aid our spiritual growth. (The picture on the front cover was taken on that walk.) Prayer thrives on open horizons, and physical broad open spaces may help us to enter the spiritual Broad Open Spaces. We go to such places to talk and pray over things that are worrying us, and to renew our strength in the Lord, so that we can return to our everyday life more in tune with His heart.

By Still Waters

If the world knew our happiness, it would, out of sheer envy, invade our retreats, and the times of the Fathers of the Desert would return, when the solitudes were more populous than the cities.

(Madeleine Sophie Barat)¹

When the Lord Jesus said, '*I go to prepare a place for you,*' (John 14:2-3), He was speaking primarily of our eternal home – but this does not rule out there being implications for time as well as for eternity. God has many places He wants to take us to, as well as people He wants us to meet. The Lord is ready to commune with us anywhere anytime, but we are not always equally as ready, or as able, to meet with Him. Certain places may therefore help to develop this life of intimacy.²

In our high-pressure high-expectancy age, we will all benefit from going to 'trysting places' both as a break from the daily grind, and in order to meditate and pray. I am convinced that not only Christian workers, but businessmen, teachers, parents and, indeed, people from every walk of life would be blessed and strengthened if they could but make the necessary sacrifices and get away to be with God.³ A place that has been consecrated to the Lord, and much prayed in, often enjoys a

special depth of His presence. May He help us to find and profit from such places!

Long ago, the Lord ordained that the people of Israel should spend seven days each year living in tents on the roofs of their houses.⁴ In this precursor to the modern camping holiday I detect a heavenly strategy. Wonderful though our home comforts are, they can inadvertently obscure our pursuit of God. A week 'in the booths' refocuses our soul on spiritual concerns.

William Wordsworth was the first to call people to the lakes and mountains of his beloved Cumbria. Living a simple life himself, and inspiring others to do the same, his words touched a chord in the heart of a nation that had been brought up on a social code of do's and don'ts, but which was woefully lacking in true spiritual riches. In the mountains, people came face to face with truly majestic vistas and longed to experience a corresponding grandeur in their own hearts.

The only danger (which the poet himself did not perhaps successfully avoid) is that some end up worshipping a pagan Mother Nature rather than our Heavenly Father.

It is not so long ago that I would have been inclined to dismiss such contact with the natural world as little more than self-indulgent distraction from the real work of serving God. Many such 'indulgences' later, I have come to realize that they are central to God's purposes for my life.

Things I would once have considered peripheral, such as opening up our blocked fireplace to enjoy a real log fire, and going for prayer-walks in the forest, have become a real aid to our desire for a closer walk with the Lord. The countryside is full of living matter, and it is good for us to be closer to it. Our processed, packaged society has become too far removed from the rhythms and seasons of life. As one cow said to another, as she gazed at a lorry delivering Pasteurized, Sterilized, Skimmed and Long Life Milk: 'I didn't realize it was all so complicated!'

When the stillness of the open spaces calms our minds and inspires our hearts, we will find it easier to enter more deeply into the stillness of eternity. Time and again we have set out into the nearby hills or woods bedraggled and oppressed, only to return home a few hours later refreshed and invigorated, having gained some new perspective on a perplexing problem. Even the Lord Jesus met with His Father more in the beauty of the hills than He did in the synagogue!

It is not that there is anything intrinsically mystical or more sacred about the countryside. Others may find just as much inspiration in an urban setting. The important thing is not so much the place itself but the fact of setting oneself at some distance from the normal routines and distractions of life. A sanctified corner of your home (or a corner of a cornfield for that matter) is all that is needed.

Let me encourage you, then, to make the effort to go to places or parks that mean a lot to you; if need be to get in the car and drive in search of woodland trails and open spaces – as well as getting into the habit of slipping into the Lord's presence wherever you happen to find yourself.

Don't waste precious time in futile inner monologues; talk to the Lord and wait for His answers. What you receive from Him at such times will distil like dew into your hearts, and from there pass on to water many other people's lives as well.

Our Trysting Place

Early in my ministry, Alex Buchanan prophesied that I would always be alternating between 'coming in' to enjoy times of intense aloneness with God and then 'going out' again on specific missions for Him. It has been inspiring to see this word being worked out. Front-line service can be heady and exciting, but too little time with God means I have insufficient spiritual resources with which to feed others.

A friend once had a picture of a hurricane lamp hanging from a hook on the ceiling, consuming its paraffin sparingly, drop by careful drop. There was an implicit warning in this picture: that the Lord did not want me to burn out too young, and that He would often call me to one side, out of the fray of active ministry, in order to renew my spirit through time alone with Him. By God's grace, I never feel so fulfilled as when I am alone and caught up with Him. But I am equally as content and just as fully in the Lord's will when I am out and about on active service for Him.

Let me share with you how the Lord led us to a place that has come to mean a great deal to us. I was suffering one night from an acute earache, and sent for the doctor. (He was a newly qualified man on secondment to our practice). We struck up an immediate friendship and I resolved to invite him round for a meal. As is so often the way with good intentions, however, I did not get round to doing anything about it.

Some weeks later, the time came for our daughter Ruth to be born. The Lord gave me an overwhelming peace that He was in complete charge of the proceedings. I was not unduly worried, therefore, when a problem occurred at the moment of birth, which required the emergency doctor to come flying through the door. We were surprised to see it was the same doctor we had met before. This time we did get together for a meal!

We heard from him again shortly afterwards. He and his wife had booked a cottage in the Lake District, and invited us to come and join them there. This cottage became a place where heaven and earth meet, where we were refreshed in body, mind and spirit – and where much of this as well as other books were first written. But it is a long way away, and we can no longer afford to go there very often. More recently, some friends have lent us a cottage nearer home, where we have enjoyed special times in the Lord's presence in a more complete way than ordinary life normally permits.

In both places, the weight of too much decision-making eases from our shoulders within minutes of scenting the familiar wood-smoke from the fire. The hours pass slowly by. The Lord, who knows how much we needed the break, makes every day rich and alive with His presence.

We are careful not to allow too much of the world to intrude. A novel to unwind with is good, but not if it introduces a discordant note into our spirits. We are glad, too, to escape from that invention which blesses us so much – except when it rings just when you are wanting an early night!

I find that it is especially when I am in 'retreat mode' that I am most consciously able to enjoy the simple things of life, and to dedicate whatever I am doing to the Lord. Whenever we come to the end of such a time and find ourselves immersed again in the daily round of urgent decision-

making, we wonder how we can integrate the heightened spiritual awareness we have been enjoying back into our everyday life. It is an important question to ponder, and one which involves a number of factors, relating to the place, as well as the pace of our life. The more we consecrate our homes, our families and our friendships to the Lord – as well as our ministries – the fuller they will be of His presence.

Each time we returned from such places we found ourselves nursing the desire to develop a home in the country which would refresh others in the same way that we ourselves had been blessed.

About two years ago we were able to acquire just such a property. It was the culmination of nearly ten years of prayer. It is set in exquisitely beautiful countryside, and is a truly wonderful place for people to spend some time 'trysting' with their Lord. Perhaps some of you will find your way here in the years ahead!

A Cherith Week

Prayer is the nearest approach to God, and the highest enjoyment of Him that we are capable of in this life.

(William Law)

Many of us will greatly benefit from spending time alone with nothing to do except to seek the Lord. In *Ravens and the Prophet*, I termed these times Cherith weeks after the enforced period Elijah spent alone by the brook Cherith. Such an immersion in the Lord's presence can have a revolutionary effect on our relationship with God, and permanently alter many of our perspectives and priorities.

Although there are a considerable variety of retreats to choose from, what I have in mind here is primarily something less structured. Most of the 'retreats' we have made over the years have been planned or unplanned trips into the country, in response to our own need for time out and the Lord Jesus' invitation to *Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest* (Mark 6:31). Given the far-reaching blessings that come from such times, it is no wonder we face spiritual opposition trying to get away. Before we first went to the cottage we mentioned in the Lake District, all three of us went down with nasty viruses, from which we only just recovered in time. In view of all the blessings we were to experience there over the next twelve years, it is no surprise that there was considerable opposition to us getting there.

Our Lord, who was always so enterprising Himself, admired the determination of the young men who lowered the paralytic through the roof. We may likewise need considerable determination to overcome all manner of complicated circumstances, plaguing thoughts, and even illnesses in order to be able to get away. We have sometimes set off on retreat feeling as though there were lead weights in our shoes, and glue on the wheels of our car. We should not be surprised. We had an amusing illustration of this one year. Rosalind and I had set off to pray at one of our favourite trysting places, only to find our pathway blocked by a huge beast. Because it was directly in front of us, we couldn't tell whether it was a bull or a cow. After some hesitation we plucked up courage and proceeded ("After you, dear!") We were relieved to discover that the 'bull' had udders! We had such a powerful time with the Lord that it made me ponder again how much Satan hates and fears our prayers. 'The cow that looked like a bull' is a picture of how the

Adversary hinders our seeking after God by sowing our path with fears and distractions.

It is best not to leave it until we are completely exhausted before we go away on retreat, because the backlog of fatigue may take many days to clear. In an ideal world, it would also be helpful to avoid plunging straight back into a maelstrom of activity the moment we return home. I am aware that few of us will find this possible in practice, but it is still a worthwhile aspiration.

Should we choose to lead a truly simple lifestyle during this Cherith week, many of us may experience all manner of withdrawal symptoms: not only from tea, coffee and chocolate, but also from our ingrained dependency on books, television and other forms of entertainment. Such a week may be just the thing to show us how addicted to them we are. To fast occasionally from everyday features of life such as rich food, friendship and phone calls can do much to sharpen our spiritual life.

Even without such extreme measures, most of us will find that it takes our soul a while to unwind and settle in the Lord's presence. After all, agendas supply most of the context of our lives, so it is hardly surprising if their temporary absence proves disconcerting. (Japanese employers have found it necessary to write manuals to help workaholic employees cope with their feelings of guilt at being away from their workplace for a few days.) Certainly, my most productive times of writing normally come later in the week when the backlog of stress and weariness has begun to wash away.

As a sign that I am making the change 'from agenda to encounter', I take my watch off. As the week develops, time can be consecrated in a more rarefied way than is usually possible. In such solitude, my whole attention is focused on the unseen. This is the time to push out the boundaries and to explore themes and studies I would not usually have the leisure to pursue. As the nights increasingly blend with the days, I am as likely to be having a time of prayer at two in the morning as at seven in the evening.

It is not hard to point to the benefits that come from taking these times out with the Lord: of insights gained and warnings shared, course-corrections effected and new ideas birthed; promises reiterated and reassurance gained. Life thus assumes a prophetic overtone once more as the Lord shares more of His wisdom and purposes with us.

But worry can rob us of our intimacy with God. It only takes one eyelash to blur our sight. Calm will develop, and anxiety be avoided (or at least be reduced) as we bring our specific worries to our Heavenly Father. Moreover, the very intensity of our desire to meet with the Lord can make us tense. Deep within us, and sometimes in the hearts of the well-wishers who were so eager to send us off on retreat, lurks the inner pressure that we ought to return from our trysting place bearing the gifts God has given us on the mountain top. The laudably high hopes we set out with that the Lord would speak to us mean that we begin to fret as the precious hours tick past: 'It's nearly time to go and He hasn't spoken yet!'

It is easy to worry and complain when we do not hear what we think we need to hear. But God comes in surprising ways and at unexpected moments – and He never leaves it too late. Patience as much as omnipotence is the hallmark of His dealings with us. Our coming away is not in vain.

Just through spending time with Him, our soul is being restored to peace, and our generous Lord will more than make up to us for the time that we have given to Him.

We must be sure to keep the shield of faith firmly in place as we finish our retreat and put our watches back on. It is not uncommon to find our joy being sharply tested by unexpected difficulties and confusions in the days following a retreat. We should not be surprised. The devil is desperate to snatch away the spiritual realities we have experienced. This again is why it is so important to record at the time the insights the Lord gives us.

Advancing through Retreats

It is not so long ago that the concept of retreats appeared to be in danger of terminal decline. Mercifully, much has now changed, as more and more Christians wake up to the enormous strategic value of going on regular retreats.

Over the past few decades there has been a marked, if partial, reduction in the role of the monasteries. In the light of this, it is all the more interesting to see that the Lord is raising up a new generation of lay retreat centres to fulfil the same role the monasteries have fulfilled since time immemorial as places to which people come for prayer and spiritual refreshment. In part we can attribute the popularity of these 'quiet houses' to a reaction against the ever-increasing stresses and strains of life. With most people's workloads soaring into the 'red revs', it is vital that we compensate by taking time out.

To be always alone with the Lord, however, would lead to an unbalanced diet. The power of God flows when we are together in fellowship with others in a way that cannot happen on a private retreat. We need the input of inspired worship and teaching, where we experience the rubbing, as well as the joy, of corporate unity.⁵

Many fellowships take huge strides forward when they go away on retreat together. More progress can be made in the life of a church during the course of a weekend than in a whole string of consecutive Sundays. This is not surprising when we consider that the church will have been praying for their time away, and that others will also be committed to praying for the work of that particular retreat house. Those who visit such places are thus in line to receive a double blessing!

My only concern is that many church weekends remain too firmly fixed on the cerebral level of teaching and sharing, rather than on seeking God's face. My longing is to help bring people who do not have much time in everyday life to wait on the Lord right through into His throne room.

If you are in a position to have any say in the running of a retreat, try to leave plenty of space in which to meet the Lord. The temptation may be strong to fill every space on the timetable, but such attention to detail may inadvertently prevent the time together from becoming the true spiritual encounter that both you and the Lord were hoping for.

For Reflection

To summarize the main theme of this chapter: it is good to go away periodically on retreat to rest and to recover both our physical and our spiritual energies. It is even better, if our lifestyle permits, to tryst as well as to rest, for these occasions provide marvellous opportunities to ex-

perience more of the Lord's power and creativity.

The more we pray in a house, or a region, the fuller it becomes of God's presence. Perhaps we will find it especially helpful to seek the Lord in one particular room (in our own or someone else's house). Many of us pray best out of doors, or while pursuing some relaxing hobby. But whatever outward form our seeking takes, the Lord will reward our eagerness to meet with Him.

Selah

*Turn away from your daily work,
Hide yourself for a little time from your restless thought;
Give yourself a little leisure to talk with God,
And rest awhile with Him.
Enter the secret chamber of your heart,
Shutting out everything but God,
And that which may help you in seeking Him.
And when you've closed the door, seek Him.
Now my whole heart says to God: 'I seek Your face,
Your face, O Lord, do I seek.'
I will seek You by desiring You,
And desire You in seeking You.
I will find You by loving You,
And love You in finding You . . .
I do not seek to understand so that I may believe,
But believe that I may understand.
For this I know to be true,
That unless I first believe I shall not understand.
(The Proslogian of St Anselm)*

References

1.
Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Saints*, Jill Haak Adels (O.U.P.).
2.
This is in no way to deny the omnipresence of God. We can be close to the Lord in any setting, just as we can be lonely in the midst of a crowd or in a place of great beauty.
3.
Secular surveys show that women are generally more prepared to allow themselves time off than men; that they look forward to holidays more, and that they make better use of them. It seems to me that women are better at waiting on the Lord. Here's a challenge for us men! It is also interesting that some of the fastest-growing churches in America are those which set their pastor aside to spend quality time thinking, praying and preparing. They are then able to feed their congregations with the spiritual wisdom they have gained.
4.
The week long 'Festival of Booths' or 'Tabernacles,' looks back to commemorate God's guidance and protection during the forty years in the wilderness, as well as forward to the coming Messiah. It is full of symbolic meaning for Christians and Jews.
5.
Many find the Taizé model helpful, because the regular meetings combine worship, silence, teaching and prayer. We can explore many such variations in our fellowships.

Chapter Five

Exploring Silence

Holy Spirit, think through me till Your ideas are my ideas.
(Amy Carmichael)

IT IS NOT USUALLY IN THE NOISY PLACES of the world that Christ is best known. To know Him deeply has always required a degree of seclusion. The more aware we are of the Lord's presence, the less we need to say. Certainly, as we came to the far end of the first stretch of our walk beside the river, the beauty of our surroundings was enough to make us quiet and reflective.

A novice nun defined contemplation as looking at the Lord and loving Him. Her friend, more experienced in the ways of God, replied that it is even more about letting the Lord look at us and speak to us. When we love someone deeply, we do not always need to be busy doing things together. After fifteen years of marriage, Rosalind and I do not need to cast around in search of inspiration for conversation; we are happy just to be together. It should be the same in our relationship with the Lord. It is a sign of maturity when we can hold intimate silence together, not just in one's and two's but as a church.

Our whole way of living in the twentieth century conspires to keep us from experiencing true silence. We cannot even go shopping without being bombarded by music that is designed to put us in a purchasing mood. Yet many Christians have followed society in becoming far too dependent on background noise. Perhaps this is because it disguises the subconscious fear that if we take time to explore this silence we might either come to enjoy it too much (and become thoroughly lazy) or, more probably, find ourselves bored out of our minds!

What then is the difference between the loneliness that we fear and the solitude and the silence which I am advocating? Perhaps we can put it this way: a greater measure of silence and solitude will not automatically help us to draw us closer to the Lord, but its absence will undoubtedly impoverish us. There is a type of solitude which is so rich in the presence of the Lord that it completely overcomes the fear of loneliness. Whether we experience solitude by our own choice or because it is forced on us, the best way to use these times is to practise coming into the presence of God until we feel at home there.

Once, at a conference, I suggested that we hold silence together during a meal. I can hardly say that people burst into visions of glory (especially when they were making ludicrous signs to each other to pass the salt!) but the underlying peace it brought cleared our minds and prepared us to do serious work in the evening meeting.

Silence is such an alien concept for most people that we need help in exploring it. It is good to

introduce extended times of silence into our services and meetings. The more we persevere (and experiment) the more we will discover an inner world that contains just as many peaks and troughs, triumphs and defeats as our more conventional spheres of service.

Going Deeper

It is true that the voice of God, having once fully penetrated the heart, becomes strong as the tempest and loud as the thunder; but before reaching the heart it is as weak as a light breath which scarcely agitates the air. It shrinks from noise, and is silent amid agitation.

(Ignatius of Loyola)

Broadly speaking, we can make a distinction between attentive silence (which is the threshold into true perception) and inattentive daydreaming – which may be little more than an excuse for indulging in all manner of idle fancies.

At its fullest, silence will help us to discover a deep soul peace, which subdues our striving, lifts us above our everyday preoccupations, and renders us more receptive to the gentle whispers of God's counsel. Such experiences may be fleeting, but the reassurance the Lord brings through them makes a deep impact on our lives.

There can be no short cuts to this life of intimacy. Pascal wrote, 'Earthly things have to be known in order to be loved; heavenly things have to be loved in order to be known.' As we make the effort to slow down our outward life, new depths of insight and creativity await us. But first we have to overcome the jingle-jangle of a stress-clogged brain and persevere through what I call 'The Five Minute Barrier'.

Some of the wandering thoughts that assail us during this initial attempt to enter silence may actually serve a useful function. It pays to jot down the more useful ideas that bombard our mind. This will keep us from spending the rest of our quiet time worrying that we will forget to make a certain phone call or to get on with some necessary chore.

We should not be surprised if we find all manner of painful hurts and unhelpful desires rising from our subconscious depths. This may be the moment when we realize that we are moving from the River of Delights to the Ascent of Toil. It is a great mistake if we give up because the going is getting tough.

The wayward emotions that rage in our soul are like the timbers of a leaky hull, which creak alarmingly as the restless waves beat against them. Our unresolved hurts and conflicts seem to overshadow everything. As we quickly realize, the sins of the mind are the hardest of all to overcome. *As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he* (Proverbs 23:7 K.J.V.).

Perhaps it will help to realize that we are bound to experience a host of soulish desires, to say nothing of a tedious parade of 'but-what-if' dreads. The more we learn to recognize the shape and nature of these thought-attacks, the easier we will find it to shun them. There are times when wisdom lies in refusing to join battle with these insistent foes. After all, we know from bitter experience that they lead only to spiritual dead-ends and emotional unhappiness.

At other times the best form of defence is attack. By converting our fears into prayer, we invite the power of the Lord into the situation. In that sense we can say that the devil plays his part in teaching us to pray without ceasing! The attacks of the evil one stir us to pray more fervently, often for issues we would not otherwise have concerned ourselves with.

For many years I aimed to get away for a few days retreat every three or four months, not only to rest after a busy speaking schedule, but also to spend uninterrupted time with the Lord. I knew this was the Lord's call on my life, but I still had to overcome occasional twinges of guilt at leaving other people working at the grindstone while I was enjoying time with the Lord.

I have come to realize that I do not go on retreat just for my own sake, but rather to be one in spirit with our friends, and on behalf of the world. People's needs stand before us with a sharpness and a vividness that rarely happens when we are too busy. The onset of the land phase of the Gulf War, the Dunblane massacre, a fire which killed a vicar's entire family, revolutions in various eastern countries as well as a critical moment in the peace talks in Ireland: these are just some of the many issues that have occurred while we have been on retreat and which we have been able to pray about.

True silence is therefore far from inactive. We are able to enjoy the shared intimacy of two people who care deeply for each other. In the silence we are also able to embrace the calling of the watchman, who is ever alert to receive the promptings of the Spirit.

Making space for silence and solitude helps to counteract the pressures that we face and takes us beyond the superficiality of so much that passes for spiritual life today. It would be a mistake to associate contemplation with rose-covered cottages, however, and some subconscious attempt to escape from the harsher realities of the world. In many ways it brings us more closely in touch with the suffering of the world.

The Perils of Silence

All the troubles of life come upon us, because we refuse to sit quietly for a while in our rooms.
(Blaise Pascal)

Most of us need to pay more attention to this call to sit at Jesus' feet. There are some, however, who are prone to hold back in the face of life's challenges. For them, the idea of 'enjoying' God's presence in this way represents a form of escapism which would lead them to embrace a world-denying seclusion that the carpenter of Nazareth could not own. We lose our fire, and our saltiness, if we withdraw from the wider body of Christ, just as a coal once removed from the grate soon loses its heat.

I dare not recommend too much solitude, therefore, lest we become unhealthily introspective and indifferent to people's real needs. Our soul requires the honing that comes from interacting with the world, honest fellowship and even from direct confrontations. If God wants solitude to play a primary part in our life (as opposed to merely being a helpful and enriching aspect of it) He will make this abundantly clear.

It is only fair to warn that Satan does not regard the place of prayer as being out of bounds. Some

of his fiercest temptations come when we are on our own with God. Periods of silence and reflection that are stimulating and refreshing when we are at peace with ourselves can prove unnerving and disorientating when our minds are overwrought. Silence magnifies the forces that are at work in our inmost being.

This is not a way of life I would recommend, therefore, for beginners, the depressed or the neurotic. Pride (or discouragement) accompany the novice, just as condemnation and anxiety stalk the emotionally unstable. Simple friendship and fellowship, together with enjoyment of the blessings we can find in God's open air, may well provide a more balanced diet at certain stages of our pilgrimage than a prolonged time of 'seeking the word of the Lord.' Compulsive activists also find inner stillness elusive. Many of these people are themselves victims of emotional deprivation and tend to overanalyse issues to the point where they have great difficulty in discerning the still small voice of God.

Solitude is equally wasted when we indulge in idle fantasies. It is not that it is wrong to dream (the mind needs to) but it is foolish to dally, for daydreams nurture insatiable longings which reality can never match. It may be helpful for us to understand what is happening through the fantasy process. We often wish or imagine ourselves to be something we are not. Daydreams, like their nocturnal counterparts, typically project us to the centre-stage and so reveal our hidden idolatries.

Unrealistic expectations are also part of the reason why we make so many unreasonable demands on our long-suffering partners, friends or pastors. The fundamental mistake we make is to look to other people to fulfil needs that, in reality, only the Lord can meet – or which can never legitimately be met by anyone!

Since delusions feed on isolation, we must be careful. The devil plies his craft in ways which pander to our religious instincts. It is easy to entertain strange ideas when we are too much on our own. Excesses of belief or behaviour can breed like bacteria when unchecked by the restraining influence of more balanced fellowship. Our carnal minds disguise themselves by a variety of subterfuges, including the conversation stumping excuse that 'God has told us to do it' – a claim which a more impartial testing would have revealed to be nonsense.

I can remember times as a young Christian worker when I entered the Lord's presence more in the hope of learning the great plans He had for my life than to give Him the love of my heart.

My desire to seek God was real enough, but my soulish ambition exposed me to hear all manner of delusions. The devil is a past master in dangling apparent opportunities before our eyes, as well as strewing our path with unhelpful distractions which end up diverting our time and energies.

Anything that overfeeds the ego needs to be avoided, as does any vision which brooks no questioning. Impulsiveness and isolation are twin rocks on the shores of disaster, which means that sound judgement and a teachable spirit are essential qualities if we are to lead the life of reflection safely. A godly caution, together with a willingness to keep in touch with people's real needs, are healthy antidotes to excessive enthusiasm, lest we fatten our souls on the flimsy fare of fantasies and delusions.

The risks are genuine, but so too is the calling. It takes courage to sit quietly with God, and not to run off and lose ourselves in some other pastime. We must face the devil, but at the same time avoid condemning ourselves. To this end, it pays to do what we can to ensure that our times of contemplation are uninterrupted. Just as revival power is easily quenched by the hostile criticism and questioning of other believers, so it takes special grace to remain in the Lord's presence once our peace has been distracted by confusing thoughts and demands.

Will we always break through the turbulence of these disturbing thoughts and come right through into the presence of God? I would dearly love to say that of course we will, but realistically this may not always be the case. If, after a period of time, our thoughts are simply refusing to settle, and we find that daydreams are making any serious reflection impossible, we may well be wiser to go and do something else.

On other occasions, we reach a place of inner stillness only to have to drag ourselves away again almost immediately as other duties beckon. It is better to have glimpsed and tasted than not to have come at all. Something of that inner peace will remain with us in the midst of the day's busyness.

To enjoy times of silence with God is to enter a far greater awareness of the ways of eternity. But we must still guard our hearts against attitudes that corrupt and undermine this inner stillness. Those who spend too much time in their own company often display an alarming readiness to pass judgements on all and sundry, mistaking their prejudices for maturity and wisdom.

None of us is strong enough to carry a prejudice and a cross at the same time. The Lord warns us '*not to look down on one of these little ones.*'¹ The moment we begin to despise other people our hearts fill with contempt and scorn and we distance ourselves from God's heart of love. There is, of course, a simple remedy: it is virtually impossible to despise someone we are praying for!

For Reflection

Our own curiosity often hinders us in the reading of holy writings, when we seek to understand and discuss, where we should pass simply on. If you would profit from your reading, read humbly, simply, honestly, and not desiring to win a reputation for learning.²

As we have seen, it takes courage, as well as discipline, to enter into silence, because it is here that we experience not only great blessings but also serious challenges. In silence, our masks fall off as we come face to face with the less attractive sides of our character.

Which of us finds prayer and forgiveness a natural response when we are subjected to unkind words and unduly harsh criticism? Try working your way through these issues, extending outwards to see how this applies first to the immediate members of your family, then to your colleagues, neighbours and church members. Finally, reach out in prayer to nations or institutions that you consider have been unkind to you personally, or to people that you love. When you can freely pray blessing on these people and countries, with passion of soul but equanimity of heart, you are well on your way to reaching true inner stillness.

Selah

Pray and meditate on this verse, and these words from Julian of Norwich, which sum up the theme of this chapter perfectly.

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools . . .

God is in heaven and you are on earth,

So let your words be few.

(Ecclesiastes 5:1-2)

This is the reason why we are not at rest in heart and soul; that here we seek rest in things that are so little that there is no rest in them, and we do not know our God who is all mighty, all wise and all good. For He is true rest. No soul can have rest until it finds created things are empty.

When the soul gives up all for love, so that it can have Him that is all, then it finds true rest. God, of Your goodness, give me Yourself, for You are enough for Me.

References

1.

Matthew 7:5, 18:10.

2.

Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*.

Part Two

The Ascent of Toil

My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for testing.
(Ecclesiasticus 2:1)

HOW WILL THE LORD reveal Himself to me? How best can He show His love? If I were still living in Old Testament days, or were unduly influenced by the world's ways of measuring success, then I might be tempted to suppose that it would be by showering me with riches, fame and honour. Unless, that is, I were a real Old Testament scholar, in which case I might notice how deeply the Lord 'forged' the character of His greatest saints.

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey Your Word . . . It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn Your decrees.
(Psalm 119:67,71)

God reveals Himself to eager young Christians as the God of Challenge and Vision, but just as He comes to battle-weary ones as the God of all Comfort, so He plunges more seasoned warriors into the Refiner's Fire. Although we love those times when we are strongly aware of His presence, hindsight reveals that it is often the difficult times which make us more singleminded in seeking the Kingdom of God.

After the honeymoon period by the River of Delights when we first come to know the Lord, we may well find that our path is now heading up a steep and arduous Ascent of Toil. It is easy to suppose the apparent withdrawal of God's grace must have come as the result of our sin. In part this may be true. When our minds are filled with self-conceit, God allows humbling experiences to come our way – even times when He puts us, like Nebuchadnezzar, out to 'eat grass' for a season – in order to straighten out our priorities. There are many other reasons, however, why we experience dryness and confusion.

When the Lord has a work of maturing to do in our lives, He may sometimes lead us away from the River of Delights, just as the path we were following turned away from the water's edge. It was narrow, rugged, and alarmingly steep. We suddenly found ourselves on The Ascent of Toil!

Spiritually, this is a time when we lose much of the pleasure we have been accustomed to enjoy in our relationship with the Lord. Our previously unshakeable awareness of eternity dips underground, leaving a mass of tangled emotions to sort out.

Listening to some preachers might lead us to suppose that constant intimacy with God is available to anyone who is prepared to receive it, any place, any time. Attractive though it may sound, such teaching is often a recipe for frustration, and little comfort at those times when our minds are overwrought and our thoughts and actions unpredictable. Genuine intimacy with God is perfectly possible, but we may need a radical rethink of what it will mean in practice. The ways by which the Lord fulfils His promises to us are very different from our original expectations.

This is not easy for the flesh. Like Gideon's army, we are often too strong in ourselves. The Lord sometimes has to expose our weaknesses in order to keep us from taking undue pride in our strengths and achievements. Great souls become great through being fashioned in God's forge.

The Ascent of Toil is the proving point beyond which the half-hearted cannot proceed; a necessary preparation for the Broad Open Spaces. Just as ships do not set sail without first undergoing extensive tests, so the Lord tests us to find out what is in our hearts. The Lord is looking to see whether we are willing to seek Him even when there appears to be little benefit in doing so.

If you are currently experiencing such severe shakings that it feels as though your original calling has been shattered into a thousand pieces, then do not take offence, no matter how strange the path by which you are being led. The Lord will not fail you. Even in the midst of great confusion and loss there will be many 'treasures of darkness.'

In this second part we shall explore some of the ways by which the Lord deepens and refines us. We shall ponder why He allows us to go through times of wilderness and suffering, and look at how we can overcome two of the greatest enemies of intimacy with God – condemnation and striving. The Ascent of Toil draws to a simple conclusion: the more yielded we are to the Lord, the more easily He can lead us.

Chapter Six

The Parable of the Forge

See, it is I who created the blacksmith who fans the coals into flame and forges a weapon fit for its work — You are My servant . . . In whom I will display My splendour.
(Isaiah 54:16; 49:3)

SOME YEARS AGO, Rosalind and I watched a blacksmith place a length of metal into a fire until it was glowing red-hot. Then he hit it hard and plunged the metal into a bucket of cold water before putting it back in the fire again. A short stubby point soon emerged, which became more pronounced with each successive stage of the hammering process.

When the blacksmith judged the point to be long enough, he bent it in two over the edge of his anvil and clamped it in a vice. Taking a pair of pliers, he shaped it with a few deft twists, tapped it with a soft wooden hammer and, barely twenty minutes later, had produced a beautiful latch for a gate!

We found it intriguing to watch something so intricate being fashioned out of a solid lump of metal. The blacksmith knew exactly what he wanted to create, but success depended on applying

the right amount of heat and pressure. Too much and the point would sheer off, too little and the metal would be insufficiently malleable to work. Incidentally, the word ‘malleable’ comes from the Latin ‘to hammer’. It is not hard to see the spiritual parallels.

John the Baptist prophesied that the Lord Jesus would baptize not only with the Spirit but also with fire.¹ The fire of God burns up impurity, not in white-hot anger but in white-hot love, separating the dross in our hearts from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. It is written: *Anything else that can withstand fire must be put through the fire, and then it will be clean — Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*²

During a time of intense refining in my life, the Lord once spoke these words to me: ‘Souls are tried in the crucible!’³ There come times in our lives when the Holy Spirit begins to expose our heart’s true motivations. It is a most uncomfortable experience. At an earlier stage of our pilgrimage we may have been eager to reform and improve others, but now we begin to see just how far we ourselves are from living in the spirit of trust and repentance. Where once we had thought we were strong, we realize now that we were simply untested.

It is the Lord who initiates such soul-scouring but it is a delicate and a dangerous time. The enemy tries to hijack the process by making us mistake this work of refining for a sense of being rejected by God. When friends let us down, ministries fail to develop as we had expected, and unforeseen setbacks happen to and around us, roots of disillusionment can easily spread their bitter poison.⁴

There is a fine balance between healthy confession and unhealthy introspection. If we focus too much on minor faults we will merely end up feeling permanently guilty. Since sin is all about getting things out of proportion, even our confession can become all-absorbingly self-centred. If we begin with confession we may never progress beyond it. Certainly, we need not only to confess our sins but to receive His cleansing and forgiveness. For this reason we may find it helpful to approach the Lord in a spirit of adoration. That is why young Christians used to be taught the principles of A.C.T.S: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication.

How gracious the Lord is! Although He may occasionally have to take drastic action, more often than not He waits for us to become sufficiently disgusted with some habit or failing before He intervenes to challenge and deliver us. The Ascent of Toil develops our love for the Lord to the point where we are willing to do anything rather than miss God’s best for us.

There is a vital principle to understand here. Neither people nor situations can crush God’s purposes for our life – but our wrong response can. There are many circumstances that we cannot change, but we are still responsible for our reaction to them. In other words, God is as interested in our response as He is in our original dilemma. As Paul and Gretel Haglin put it: ‘The Lord wants our hearts to become stronger, not harder, through the things that happen to us.’

The Parable of the Forge is a poignant reminder that the Lord is unflinchingly determined to fit us for effective service, both now and for all eternity. If that means challenging our complacency and weaning us from feelings of superiority (or the love of ease) then the Lord will not hesitate to

do so. He is thinking of eternal fruit, and He is quite prepared to prune us radically – even to the point where He may remove the strongest and most dominant ‘branches’ of our life. Our Heavenly Father thinks less of the pain such pruning causes in the short term than of the healthy growth that will come in the future.

As we advance beyond this period of inner testing (and always remember that these times are cyclical rather than once-for-all) the Lord develops in us a more rounded faith. He will not allow this process of refining to continue one moment longer than is really necessary. Provided that we respond to His challenges with faith and repentance we will emerge from such times better equipped to abide in the fear of the Lord.

The wilderness experiences we shall be examining in the following chapters do make the Ascent of Toil feel at times overwhelmingly steep, but the Lord provides respites on the way. We must continue to climb in the shadow through the ravines until we reach the sunlit Broad Open Spaces at the top. What joy there is when a particular season of testing is complete, and we begin to glimpse the treasures the Lord has unearthed in and for us through the darkness!

For Reflection

In what ways have you seen the Parable of the Forge in action in your own life? It would be a humbling but useful idea to keep a record of the Lord’s chastisements as well as of His more obvious blessings! Ponder the following ways by which the Lord ‘forges’ our character:

Place a nail on a board. Will it ever go through the wood on its own, no matter how sharp it is? No, indeed. You will only sink it into the board by hitting it with a hammer. We are just the same; it is only by hammer blows that God manages to humble us, no matter how good our native disposition might be.

(Anthony Claret)

I pray God may open your eyes and let you see what hidden treasures He bestows on us in the trials from which the world thinks only to flee.

(John of Avila)

Is not the life of man upon earth a trial? Who would want troubles and difficulties? You command us to endure them, not to love them. No person loves what He endures, though he may love the act of enduring. Love makes it easy to carry out whatever is difficult in His command.

(Augustine)⁵

Selah

Lord God, I cry to You, forge within My heart all that is most pleasing to You. Do whatever it takes to set me free from the selfish passions and fixations that war against my soul, so that my words and my attitudes may more nearly reflect Your heart.

Help me to cope with the uncertainties of not understanding what You are doing, and to welcome Your hidden dealings with me. May my trust match my calling, and Your power be granted for each task that You call me to embrace. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

References

1.

Luke 3:16, cf Mark 9:49.

2.

Numbers 31:23; Hebrews 4:13; 'Laid bare' (*gymnos* in the Greek) literally means 'naked.'

3.

To develop this theme, study the word 'try' in a concordance.

4.

Hebrews 12:15.

5.

Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Saints*, Jill Haak Adels (O.U.P.).

Chapter Seven

The Wilderness

Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.
(Isaiah 50:10)

IN ONE FORM OR ANOTHER all of us will encounter the Ascent of Toil. Writers commonly refer to this as a wilderness experience. Such times nearly always take us by surprise, but the God who covered more than two-thirds of the earth's surface with oceans, tundra, glaciers and deserts uses these spiritual wildernesses in a special way to aid our preparation for eternity. The Hebrew word for wilderness, *midbar*, embraces not only the rugged terrain of literal deserts, but any land that could not easily be cultivated. If we can grasp the spiritual concept that lies behind the *midbar* it will help us to make some sense of our times in the wilderness, and help us to strengthen others who feel bewildered as a result of them.

Three Types of Wilderness

Spiritual wildernesses, like their geographical counterparts, come in different shapes and sizes. We will explore four main types. The most common is 'The Wilderness of Sin' which is largely the result of our own stupidity or neglect of God. There is also 'The Wilderness of Satan' when our enemy through some illness, attack or other hindrance, makes it hard for us to feel God's presence, or to implement His will in a given situation.

This is rather different from 'The Waterless Wilderness' which usually accompanies a dull and dreary stage in our lives, when nothing much appears to be happening. The fourth type, 'The Wilderness of Preparation' is quite different, as we shall see.

As young Christians we were taught that if God feels distant, then it must be that we are the ones who have moved! After all, we can usually trace most of our suffering to our own recklessness or negligence. The Lord sometimes has to 'close' our blessings down until we recognize how foolish we have been. Repentance (literally a turning around) is ever God's exit point from these self-induced 'Wildernesses of Sin.'¹

As our walk with the Lord matures, however, it no longer suffices to suppose sin to be the sole, or

even the chief, reason for our wilderness experiences. As Tozer put it, 'To be right with God has often meant to be in trouble with men.'

Following the will of the Lord often leads us into the zone of maximum conflict. On both occasions in the gospels when we see the disciples in a storm, it was as a direct result not of their disobedience but of their obedience. It must have felt like the last straw when they saw their master sleeping peacefully with his head on a pillow. 'Look, Jesus, don't you care that we're going to drown? Even if you can't do anything about it, at least you could wake up and worry with the rest of us!'

We love to see the Lord Jesus stilling the storm with a word but His subsequent rebuke to the disciples for their lack of faith is a timely reminder to us when we allow unbelief a foothold in our hearts.² The moment Jesus sees how convinced we are of our need for Him, He reaches out His hand to steady us.

Perhaps satanic powers had whipped this storm up because they saw the Lord Jesus heading to deliver the demoniac on the other side of the lake? They certainly make strenuous, and often highly damaging, assaults on the minds and bodies of those who are on the front line for the Lord. Many illnesses, accidents and other intrusive pressures sometimes conspire to make us feel distant from God – to say nothing of causing us trouble both in the world and in the Church. The warfare can be intense.

We need to use our God-given faith and authority to resist the devil, and to handle these satanically-induced wildernesses. When the battle is too much for us to bear on our own, we must enlist the support of praying friends. (It is usually pride, in one form or another, that stops us from asking for help!)

By contrast, the Waterless Wilderness requires courage and endurance. By definition it is monotonous. This brings its own inherent dangers, for boredom is a condition that satanic forces are particularly skilled at nurturing. The dreariness of so many churches, as well as so many marriages, testify to the handiwork of unseen forces that rob us one small step at a time of our enthusiasm for the people, causes and institutions to which we were once so willing to give our all.

Short periods of intense pressure may actually serve to stimulate our faith. We cry out best and loudest when crises drive us to our knees. Coping with prolonged seasons of monotony, or with some unwelcome change to our situation or status, however, can often be a greater test. If there is something in us that inclines us to believe that Jesus is against us, then it will be the Waterless Wilderness which exposes our heart of unbelief.

The less that we are prospering outwardly, the more our inner uncertainties are exposed. A longing for something fresh and exciting leads not only the young and impressionable astray, but may even push apparently mature people into the most outlandish escapades.³

The deeper we plunge into the Waterless Wilderness, the more acutely aware we become of our helplessness. Is it not when we recognize our utter helplessness that we lean more fully on the Lord and learn to esteem others more highly than ourselves? Is not this what it means to live in

the fear of the Lord?

Difficulties may threaten to overwhelm us, but we should not back out of our God-given plans, any more than Paul was prepared to yield to the pleas of his friends and turn aside from going up to Jerusalem just because they were prophesying great hardships ahead for him.⁴

It is better to ‘harness’ our feelings of inadequacy and cry out to the God who has unlimited power to help us.⁵ After all, many of the Kingdom’s greatest projects begin in the most unpromising manner – mighty trees from the smallest seeds. The Lord already sees the full-grown tree in the seed, as if with double vision. It is harder for us to do the same.

The first Protestant missionary to China saw just one convert in the first decade of his ministry, and only one more in the next ten years. Who could have guessed then that this small-scale work would one day expand to bring millions into the Kingdom in that formidably hostile country? Just think of all that would have been missed if these early missionaries had given up! Again and again we must set out ‘by night’, not knowing where our efforts will lead. God has great things in store for His children, and He loves to turn the night to day.⁶

The Wilderness of Preparation

The final type of desert is quite different from the others in that it originates primarily in an initiative from God Himself. For this reason alone it is less well understood, yet Scripture provides us with precedents. For example, shortly after the Lord Jesus was baptized in the Holy Spirit, He was led (some texts say driven) by the same Spirit into a literal desert to endure forty days of the most gruelling testing. Luke declares that Jesus went into the wilderness *full of the Spirit*, but that He emerged from it *in the power of the Spirit* (Luke 4:1,14).

This distinction between fullness and power is a crucial one. Many would claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit but how many of us can honestly be said to be moving in the power of the Spirit? Although at first sight the example of Jesus is of an altogether different ilk from our own experience, I believe that Scripture shows us that such wildernesses often serve as a bridge to this deeper anointing. Sometimes, after God has given us a clear word or vision, the very opposite of what we believe He has promised begins to happen. This can be very confusing.

Moses received a genuine call to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but Pharaoh rebuffed him repeatedly. He even withdrew from the Israelites the means to make their daily quota of bricks, but not the demand that they must be made. This example is an extreme one, but we may often experience the principle at work to a lesser extent in our own lives. The fact is that great testing must precede great service.

Samuel discerned Israel’s future king in a young shepherd boy, but God intended to train David in a cave before allowing him to reign in a palace. Saul of Tarsus, by contrast, was already a mature man by the standards of the world before his conversion, but he nevertheless required a further fourteen years of training before the Lord finally deemed him ready for his mission. Basilea Schlink felt led to prepare a course of Bible studies for the wives of prospective pastors. She even went so far as to set up a house and prepare beds for them. Because of the Nazis’ hostility towards all things Christian, however, the facilities remained unused from 1936 right

through until 1944. During these eight years she often wondered what had happened to the promise the Lord had given her. Later, He developed a ministry through this remarkable woman on a scale she could never have dreamt of in those early days.

Spiritual matters are rarely as clear cut as we would like them to be of course. Several factors usually combine to make up a wilderness experience. Even Moses' initial reason for spending forty years in the desert appears to owe less to God's leading than to his running away after committing an act of murder! Likewise, the most immediate reason for Elijah's time in the southern desert was his fear of Jezebel. Yet God used all these wildernesses for His own ends. He is the Lord of the *midbar*.

Nurturing Trust during Desert Times

The great heart cry of the contemplative saints through the ages has been that we should learn to live beyond the world of our immediate senses. In other words, we are to trust the Lord's character even when we can no longer discern His leadings. As Tozer put it:

Repentance is a sincere apology to God for distrusting Him for so long, and faith is throwing oneself upon Christ in complete confidence.

God reminds us through these wilderness experiences of how little control we have over our lives. We can regulate neither the things that happen to us, nor the flow of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Jesus wants to be both the Shepherd who strides ahead to prepare the way for us and the Staff on which we lean. If it takes the apparent withdrawal of His presence to make us depend on Him more fully, then so be it.

Ultimately, it does not matter that we feel bereft. It is our faith God requires, not our feelings. God is still ordering the things we experience, and providing us with all that we need, even during these times when familiar landmarks and reassuring points of security are being shaken and can no longer be relied on.

The first thing that happens in any wilderness situation is that we lose our sense of direction. Spiritually this can be as disconcerting as when we drive in thick fog and are no longer able to recognize even the most familiar landscapes.

In *The Silver Chair*, one of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan, who represents the Lord, gives Jill Pole a number of signs to look out for in her adventure. As they stand on a high cliff top they all seem easy to understand, but Aslan warns her that they will be much harder to remember and to recognize at ground level. And so it proved.

This story is a striking illustration of the way in which almost every vision God gives us passes through a disorientating wilderness phase during which the promised goal appears tantalizingly far out of reach.

It is not easy to cope with these unsettling times, when precious props are removed from our lives, and strong desires remain unfulfilled. But we can be encouraged. If the Lord leads us into a 'Wilderness of Preparation', it is actually a sign of spiritual promotion, rather than the demotion

it feels like at the time.

Jesus will bring us safely through every wilderness, and He is trusting us to keep going. All His promises will be fulfilled, because His commissions contain His hidden provision. He who sent us out will also provide all that we need to make it to the end of our journey.

Many years ago I went for a walk one Pentecost Sunday morning to ask the Lord what He wanted me to do with my life. I had been through a prolonged wilderness, and was in great distress of spirit, convinced that my many failings meant the end of everything. As I sat beside a canal, I heard the Lord's voice again: 'I have empowered you as a speaker, but I have called you to be a writer.'

On the following day a man who knew nothing about what I had heard the day before brought me this word of prophecy: 'I have a message, I have a pen, I need a writer. If you are willing, I will be with you.' The Lord had given me both confirmation and commissioning, and it helped to bring me out of that particular wilderness.

For Reflection

All of us need encouragement to keep going through times of wilderness. When temptations assail us and the enemy comes in like a flood (as they are bound to do if we are making an impact for the Lord!) it is good to remind ourselves that the Lord is very careful in the things He allows to come our way. He has not suddenly gone off duty.

The situation that you are dreading, and finding so hard, may actually be the very means by which the Lord intends to mature and refine you. Even though you feel as though you are being laid on one side at the moment, take heart: He is still working out His purposes for you, and He has not forgotten your address! The more cheerfully you embrace His will and set your heart to praise Him, the more easily you will endure this wilderness time, and emerge from it in the power of His Spirit.

Selah

Thank You, Father, that You are Lord of the wilderness. Whatever the reason for the difficult times I am going through now, please use them to further Your own purposes. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

1.

Psalm 32:3-5 .

2.

Mark 4:35-41.

3.

The Church has been slow to recognize, let alone to teach about the mid-life crisis, which can affect people as young as in their early thirties. This is the time when many married couples break faith with one another, perhaps because one or both partners are seeking an unattainable degree of romance and excitement. When reality fails to measure up to their inflated expectations, the relationship is abandoned, and the people concerned condemn themselves (and others) to further forlorn attempts to fulfil their impossible desires.

I suspect that certain parts of the charismatic movement may likewise have inadvertently fuelled people's

expectations to a frankly unrealistic pitch. This often leads to factions, splits and, in the long term, causes much unhappiness. We would do well to heed these words of John Henry Newman: *To take up the cross of Christ is no great action done once for all; it consists in the continual practice of small duties which are distasteful to us.*

4.

Acts 21:4-14.

5.

Hallesby makes this point about our helplessness splendidly in his book, *Prayer* (I.V.P.).

6.

Psalm 139:12

Chapter Eight

The Dark Night of the Soul

Who is blind but My servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to Me, blind like the servant of the Lord?

(Isaiah 42:19)

BEYOND THE WILDERNESSES we have considered so far lie still drier and more testing times. The Dark Night of the Soul is the extreme form of The Wilderness of Preparation. It is characterized by the apparent loss of all the blessings we associate with being close to God – and it may last for a considerable length of time.

Towards the end of 1987 the Lord began to unsettle us. In a rather dramatic way He showed us that we would shortly be moving from Chester to south Shropshire. It happened like this. We had just returned from a mission to Pakistan, and had set out for a short drive in the country. On our way, we felt the Lord leading us to drive on and visit Ludlow. By the end of the day, we were convinced He was telling us to move there!

As we drove back to Chester, the Lord directed us to visit some friends. It turned out that all day long they had been getting the words: ‘Robert and Roz, Ludlow, Robert and Roz, Ludlow.’

They had even dug their atlas out to find out where Ludlow was – yet we ourselves had had no intention of going there when we had set out that morning.

Confirmations flooded in, as the Lord signposted our forthcoming departure. It was important for Him to do this clearly because, as a ‘Levite’, there were no career advertisements for me to apply for; I had no choice but to follow His leading. God had spoken, we were willing to obey – but nothing happened! I will never forget waking up one morning and feeling a great bleakness inside. It was as though I had pulled back the curtain and was looking out on a sea of fog. ‘It will pass,’ I thought hopefully. But it didn’t. This strange sense of inner bewilderment lasted for several months. Strong fears assailed me, particularly at vulnerable moments, such as late at night

or early in the morning.

By His grace this darkness was primarily a private matter, and did not particularly affect my public ministry. It was profoundly disturbing! I was concerned to know why I found myself in such spiritual darkness. Had I given Satan some hold over my life? The best of us can think of plenty of reasons why God might choose to stay away for a while!

Satan has a vested interest in pursuing such promising lines of self-condemnation. But since God will not fail to warn us when we really have sinned, it is rarely worthwhile spending too much time asking 'Why?' We are probably in no better a position to grasp the reason for our suffering than Job was, in which case it is wise to skip the tricky questions. Were God to explain the purpose of a trial it would destroy its object anyway, which is to draw us into an ever-deepening attitude of trust. Better to use the sense of emptiness as a challenge to seek God – and to concentrate on loving others more wholeheartedly.

For the time being it felt like playing 'Hide and Seek', with God doing most of the hiding. Augustine neatly sums up what sounds at first like an unfair paradox: 'O God, You seek those who hide from You, and hide from those who seek You.'

The 'greyness' drove me to seek God ever more urgently. By the end of most days I could look back and see that God had indeed done something precious in the course of it. But by the following morning – there would be the greyness again!

There were, of course, breathing spaces; rather like those times when the sun breaks through the clouds and bathes the countryside in its golden light. For the most part, however, I felt deprived of His comforting presence and the day to day awareness of His leading – and I missed this very much indeed.

Making Sense of the Dark Night

I seek Him and He won't be found; He turns a deaf ear to my sighs and moaning. 'Tell me who You are and what You want,' I say to Him. 'Make Yourself known and then let me die.' I am uncontrolled almost to the extent of being rude to Him. I end up by calling Him cruel, but immediately afterwards beg His pardon. Some of the things I say are prompted not by anger but by so much love. (Gemma Galgani)¹

My reason for sharing this experience (which often lies towards the end of the Ascent of Toil) is to help others to make sense of feelings which seem totally bewildering. More than we are usually able to appreciate at the time, the 'dark night' is a well-charted path that many have walked.

Originally used by the Spanish mystic John of the Cross, the 'dark night of the soul' is a term which has become widespread to describe prolonged periods when our senses are shut down to the point where we can no longer feel the Lord's presence.

Let me stress again that this is entirely different from the darkness we experience in the 'Wilderness of Sin' which comes as the result of our own stupidity. During a 'dark night' experience, prayer is dull and Bible-reading an effort. Verses that once lit up to us in a haze of glory

now appear wreathed in a sea of mist. Worse still, disturbing lusts and other feelings we had thought long since dead and buried return to plague us. During these dark nights, any inordinate desires we have been nursing (or trying to suppress) seize their opportunity and surge to the fore.

Until we go through such testing times we may have thought we were quite good people at heart. As Benjamin Franklin wryly observed, 'He who falls in love with himself will have few rivals!' The dark night strips away the veneer of pride and pretence from our soul. By the end of it we will be as convinced as Paul was that there is nothing good that dwells within us.¹ Even our so-called abilities now appear to be little more than pomp and posing. The giftings of others, by contrast, shine out clearly. Henry Suso reminds us of the value of these times:

Painful and difficult prayer is more pleasing to God than one which is easy and tranquil. The grief and pain of one who tries to pray in vain, lamenting his inability to do so, makes him a victor in God's sight.¹

Whereas we may have experienced the Lord coming close in the past to share ideas and directions with us, now He guides us from afar. It is rather like the moment when a father decides that his child is old enough to be left to walk for himself without needing constant support. But the father is still there, should the toddler fall.

Precious understandings concerning the sovereignty of God are put to the test. 'Surely,' we told each other, 'if the Lord is still guiding us so accurately in the smallest details of our lives, He must be in control of our bigger needs!' And He was. When we really were in danger of taking some wrong course the Lord worked with surprising speed to rescue us. Time and again we proved the truth of the promise in Isaiah 30:21: *Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way: walk in it.'*

When the difficult time finally passed, and everything began to flow again, it took a while for us to regain our confidence. The Lord did not need to say much about the issues that we thought were the most important. What He was seeking to develop in us through the darkness was a greater trust.

When it comes to His closest friends – His mother for example – He tests their faith by keeping them waiting for the miracle. At Cana of Galilee, when His mother puts the difficulties of their host before Him, He tells her that His time has not yet come. He allows Lazarus to die when Martha and Mary have sent warning that he is sick. Why shouldn't our Lord treat me the same way, by keeping me waiting first, then satisfying all the dearest wishes of my heart?
(Thérèse of Lisieux)¹

It is precisely these delays which challenge our patience. It is the easiest thing in the world to handle these times of darkness and dryness in the wrong way and to allow anxiety and even depression to enter our hearts on the back of the greyness. To see dismal circumstances (or indeed our own soul) without the Lord's covering grace can be a most discouraging sight. If we do not handle this right it can lead to despair. As François Mauriac reminds us:

The road to perfection skirts the abyss of despair. To the very end, despair remains the temptation of those who have not retreated in the face of Christ's command: 'Be ye therefore perfect as also your

heavenly Father is perfect.' Not to despair, but to persevere in the attempt, is the definition of that heroic virtue which marks the saint.

At all costs we must resist the temptation to draw back. As Ignatius of Loyola insists, this is not the time for making important decisions:

In time of desolation one should never make a change, but stand firm and consistent in the resolutions and decisions that guided him the day before the desolation, or to the decision which he observed in the preceding consolation. For just as the good spirit guides and rejoices us in consolation, so in desolation it is the evil spirit which guides and counsels.¹

I infinitely prefer those times when I feel close to God. I am reassured of His love, given insight into why He has allowed certain things to happen, and am far more confident about which course of action to adopt. In short, I am refreshed by what the old writers used to call 'God's consolations.' Such consolations can, however, be rather like sunbathing on the beach: deeply enjoyable, but not necessarily very profitable. By contrast, our dark times provoke a much sharper longing to seek God's face and to fulfil His purposes for us. As Jean Vianney put it, When one has no consolations, one serves God for Himself alone, but when one has them one is liable to serve Him out of love for self.¹

Discerning a Dark Night of the Soul

The struggles we wage between soul and body, mind and spirit, frequently baffle philosophers and psychologists alike. They are clearly intended by God to be our special dilemma; the backcloth to our lives, and our particular training ground for eternity. So what is the difference between this 'inner bleakness' we have spoken of and medical depression? Many pastors and doctors have wrongly equated the dark night with depression, and made an entirely false diagnosis as a result. We need some sort of a 'litmus' test to help us discern whether someone is backsliding, going through a time of depression or experiencing a genuine dark night of the soul. The symptoms may indeed appear similar, but the causes are quite different. Depression turns people in on themselves, depriving them of normal feelings and desires. During a genuine dark night of the soul, by contrast, our desire to be close to the Lord continues unabated: we simply no longer feel able – or worthy – to do anything about it.

Following John of the Cross's own counsel, we may suggest that if a person's desire for God remains constant however far from His presence they may be feeling, then the chances are that they are experiencing a true 'dark night' rather than something of their own making. Only if they are being drawn to some other person or pursuit are they in actual danger of backsliding.

To see the true direction of our heart perhaps we need look no further than at how we spend our leisure time. If we find ourselves routinely rearranging our timetable to accommodate something we would feel embarrassed to mention in the presence of other Christians, then it may well be that it has come to assume too large a place in our lives.

Dry times also have the virtue of testing the reality of the truths we so glibly pronounce: in other words, the degree to which we are willing to live out the spiritual truths that trip so lightly off our tongues. Mourning the apparent absence of God can, paradoxically, be powerful evidence of our

love for Him.

Not every troubled patch we go through, of course, is a dark night of the soul. It may rather be something in our past that needs sorting out, or some attack of Satan which needs to be withstood. We will benefit by sharing what is going on in our spiritual life with someone who is more experienced than we are in the ways of God. They may well be able to diagnose what we dare not for ourselves: that everything is fundamentally all right beneath the outward upheavals.

After several months of inexplicable battering, it was a great comfort to us to meet John Sandford, one of America's leading prophets. The Lord gave John a clear word for us that we had been passing through a dark night of the soul, and that God was leading us to a land that would be 'endlessly evergreen'. It was a great encouragement to be able to put a label to what we had been going through, and to know that we were still on the right track.

John warned us that the way into this land would lie across a bridge so narrow that the only way the Lord could take us across safely was with a blindfold on. Why did we have to travel by such a precarious route? Perhaps the answer lies in part because an easier journey would have caused us to lose the sharp edge of our dependency.

Another aspect to what we experienced then, and on subsequent occasions, is that there is strong satanic opposition to overcome when we are on the brink of embarking on something significant. We need a robust and vigorous faith to overcome the many pressures that assail us at such times. In the dark places of our soul, the Lord is separating the wheat from the chaff, and sharpening the focus of our desire for the King Himself. Not just on our latest project but on the need to love more perfectly. For love is the essence of the Kingdom.

I am coming across more and more people who have been through this refining process. The sands of aridity have left their mark on them. In place of presumptuous attitudes we find a deeper gratitude and a stronger hope. Less dogmatic and bombastic than they used to be, their lives reflect something of a dying man's delight in the ordinary things of life – and a simple desire to bless the people that they meet.

God Comes in Disguise

Where now is the joy of Your presence, which I seek above everything? . . . 'I shall and shall not be with you. I shall clothe you in My grace, but you will think yourself deprived of it, because while dwelling within you I shall be able to go unrecognized. I am concealing Myself from you so that you may discover by yourself what you are without Me.'

(Margaret of Cortona)¹

If we are tempted to ask ourselves what the Lord gains by 'hiding' Himself for so long, the key lies in looking at the fruit that comes from these testing times: the 'treasures of darkness' we referred to earlier. There came a time when God left King Hezekiah for a while to find out what was in his heart (Isaiah 45:3). This too may be part of His dealings with us. The host of heaven observe us closely during these dark night experiences, longing for us to keep trusting in the Lord, despite our daunting circumstances and our inner bewilderment.

Suppose you have a friend who supports you in some practical way, perhaps financially. One day, without any prior notice, this support ceases. The temptation is to feel let down, resentful even. Imagine your embarrassment when you discover that it had only been a ruse. Your friend has simply found a different way to support you, amounting to at least as much as before. This is a picture which hints at the way the Lord works in our lives.

Just as the reality of His Lordship was hidden from most people while He was on earth, so He conceals His power and presence from our hearts for a season. It is as though He cloaks Himself in darkness to disguise many of the good things He is doing for us – even though it feels for all the world as though we are being made into a spectacle before both men and angels.

The Lord Jesus does not necessarily care for us in the same way year after year. He changes the reference points that have, in the past, afforded us security. All this is part of His disguise, just as He appeared in changed form to Mary Magdalene in the garden after the Resurrection, and to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He still insists that we behold Him with the eye of faith: the King of Kings, the Lamb of God, the Shepherd of the sheep, Emmanuel, the Morning Star, the Living Bread, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Alpha and Omega. May the Lord help us to take hold of these words He addressed to His disciples: *I tell you the truth: it is for your good that I am going away* (John 16:7).

So much, perhaps, is comforting and enlightening. But what do you make of these two explanations of dark times?

Often it is the Lord's will that we should be persecuted and afflicted by evil thoughts, which we cannot cast out, and also by aridities; and sometimes He even allows these reptiles to bite us, so that we may learn better how to be on our guard in the future.
(Teresa of Avila)¹

Whenever the feeling of grace is withdrawn, pride is the cause. Not necessarily because one has actually yielded to it, but because if this grace were not withdrawn from time to time, pride would surely take root. God in His mercy protects the contemplative in this way, though some foolish beginners will think He has turned enemy to them.
(The Cloud of Unknowing)

Surviving the Drought

No one would complain about the troubles that happen to him if they knew the scales on which they were weighed.
(Rose of Lima)¹

When our inner life is being shaken, it helps enormously if we can keep our outward routine as stable as possible. Whether we are in a dark night of the soul, or are suffering from depression, what we will really benefit from is someone who will stand alongside and support us through our bewilderment. The last thing we need is cajoling to 'pray more' or to attend more meetings. To tell a person who is going through a dark night to 'try harder' is like urging a man who is suffering from a broken leg to go for a good brisk walk!

But people may not always be available for us. This is why we must put down tap roots so that we

can continue to draw up water for our soul during these seasons of drought, drinking deeply of the truths we have come to know and trust over the years. No matter that they no longer light up for us with a golden hue; the Scriptures have stood the test of time, and His specific promises to us too will be fulfilled. We must meditate on them, and take in all their goodness.

Time in the great outdoors can help to refresh our troubled minds. Music and poetry too can soothe weary spirits, and hint at meaning beyond our immediate pain. Mysterious though His dealings with us may appear to be, there is nothing too difficult for the Lord – and nothing too small for Him to attend to either.

Stay until you leave!

During the difficult transition period we experienced between leaving Chester and reaching Ludlow I had a dream. I was trying to swim out to sea, but a warm tidal current was sweeping me in the opposite direction up a river. I knew instinctively that the best thing to do would be to yield to the current, rather than fight against it. The implication was clear. The Lord knew exactly where He was taking me: my job was to trust myself to His leading.

By temperament and nature most of us prefer to swim rather than to float. We have been taught, almost from the cradle, that if we want to get anywhere in life, we have to be ‘in control’. True, nothing is accomplished by sitting down and putting our feet up. I am not advocating drifting idly through life, let alone setting off to do our own thing. Such a course of action would be sure to land us on the rocks, or in the grip of dangerous currents. I am speaking rather of responding positively to the Lord’s longing for us to trust Him more fully, and to yield ourselves more wholeheartedly to His leading.

Most of us could walk along a plank of wood thirty centimetres wide, almost with our eyes shut. By that reckoning, surely we should be able to stroll successfully across that same plank were it to be stretched between two high buildings? After all, the plank would still be as wide as it ever was – but all we would think of then is just how narrow it is. Yet we all know the gap between theory and reality. The increased sense of vertigo that comes from being in high places (and dealing with issues of far-reaching importance) calls for steadier nerves. When I followed the Lord’s leading to Chester I was a single man, with only myself to consider. Yet the Lord can care for a family as well as He can for a single person.

Which of us find times of waiting easy to bear? Our hearts are eager to embark on the new thing the Lord is promising us and we find it hard to focus on the here and now. John and Paula Sandford teach a golden rule concerning such transition times: ‘Stay until you leave!’ In other words, *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might* (Ecclesiastes 9:10). If we are faithful with the opportunities the Lord gives us today, then He will go ahead to prepare all our tomorrows. If we do not follow this advice, however, we may find ourselves beginning to live for some mythical moment when ‘everything will happen’.

Sadly, some become impatient or frustrated, and leave their job, town, relationship, church or ministry. The devil does his level best to make us opt out (or to stay put when the Lord is telling us to move on). But God also uses these attacks to measure our willingness to persevere. Our flesh screams out with the intensity of the conflict. We feel like Charlie Brown as he made his way

to the information desk and demanded, 'Where do you go when you want to give up?'

Near the end of his life, Winston Churchill returned to Harrow, his old school. To everyone's amazement, his entire address lasted less than a minute – but each person who heard it will surely remember every word: 'Young men, never give up. Never give up, never, never, never, never give up!'

Beyond the Darkness

When it is all over, you will not regret having suffered; rather you will regret having suffered so little, and suffered that little so badly.

(Sebastian Valfre)¹

When we emerge from such periods of darkness, they will not seem to have been a moment too long or a jot too costly. By stripping us of things that had perhaps meant too much to us, the Lord has prepared us for the greatest gift of all: being able to walk more closely with Him. However much we may have failed Him, He will not fail us. There is no trial or situation that is beyond the reach of God's love. Jesus is willing to go to incredible lengths to rescue us from every wilderness, and to restore our souls again to peace. Peter had to come down off the Mount of Transfiguration to minister to needy people. Mary Magdalene likewise felt great joy when she saw first the angels and then her Risen Lord – but the Lord did not permit her to cling to Him. We can only keep our treasure by giving it away again.

It is easy to feel grieved when especially sweet times in the presence of the Lord come to an end, but we have not lost Him forever. Standing on a Metro station in Paris after bidding farewell to the fellowship that had meant so much to me for the year I had been there, the uppermost emotion in my heart was a sense of loss, because I imagined that I would never again meet such lovely people. I was singing under my breath, 'O Jesus I have promised, to serve Thee to the end.' For a moment I was caught up into heaven and thought I heard an astonishing echo: 'And I have promised to serve you to the end'. How great He is, that He stoops down to serve His children!

To drive with confidence in the fog, however, is not easy; it strains every part of our being. Similarly, if the Lord entrusts us with a dark night experience it will rank among the most grueling episodes in our lives. It may, however, be an indispensable stage in our spiritual training. In his brilliant *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis shows that the devil fears nothing so much as a person who looks around a universe from which all traces of its Creator appears to have vanished, but who resolves to go on trusting in the Lord anyway.

We are reaching the heart of a great mystery here, which, if we can but grasp it, will help to make sense of many of the detours and delays we experience, and save us from much distress and anxiety. Like the psalmist we can declare: *Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen* (Psalm 77:19).

How long will such dark nights last? The only honest answer is: as long as it takes. The Lord alone knows the right time to rescue us. Just as some are tempted to presume they have been through a dark night when they have not, in reality, been anywhere near one, so we may also be

tempted to suppose that we have come through it before we really have. The drought does not necessarily break with the first shower. God had simply provided us with oases in the desert before the sand closes in again around us.

One of the great wonders of nature is how a downpour of rain can cause the barren desert to blossom into riotous colour overnight. Just beneath the surface the dormant seeds are lying, waiting. So it is that when the grace of God is poured out, the Lord can accomplish a great deal in a surprisingly short space of time. We are at once reassured and cheered when we again become conscious of His presence with us; just as the disciples were when they saw the Risen Lord.

It is only when we forget that the victory has been won that we become anxious. Jesus is still there, and God's purposes for us have not altered. Something has changed in our heart however. The removal of the normal inward flow of the Spirit in our lives has made us eager to pray more seriously, and to do anything that will help to restore us to a sense of His presence. We become less preoccupied with outward goals, and more concerned to say, do and even think such things as will bring glory to the cause of the Kingdom.

Whereas we may have been quick before to categorize and to label, the Ascent of Toil has made us less willing to judge people by appearances, and more concerned to love and serve them. Perhaps, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested, we should 'regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do and more in the light of what they suffer.'

As we reflect on how faithful the Lord has been to us during our times of trial, so we see that these apparent absences are intended to make us less inclined to doubt the reality of God's love for us in the future. When we look back over these periods we will see that at the time when God appeared to be doing least, He was really doing most.

As light dawns again we cry out 'How blind I have been! Why did I ever doubt Him?' We are ashamed of our angry outbursts and the complaining spirit that has marred our union with the Lord. We resolve that we will trust Him more fully next time, and so bring joy to the Lord and His angels.

In Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, the saint entreated the Lord who had appeared to him in a vision: 'Where were You? Why didn't You appear in the beginning, so that You could stop my distresses?' And a voice came to him: 'I was here, Anthony, but I waited to watch your struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be your helper forever, and I will make you famous everywhere.'

Just as the Father sent Jesus, so He is sending us too (John 20:19-21) – whatever this means in terms of mission or career. For us personally, the end of the dark night coincided with the door opening at last to enable us to move safely and swiftly to Ludlow, in south Shropshire.

Fifteen further action-packed months went by in Chester, during which we benefited from that special grace the Lord so often gives when people sense you will not be there much longer, and are in consequence more willing to open up. Suddenly the Spirit moved, and the call became a

commission. We were free to start looking for a property. Even then there were several months of heartache and frustration ahead: we could find nothing that we either liked or could afford.

When I was invited to Ludlow for my first speaking engagement, I resolved that I would concentrate on the matter in hand and not confuse the issue by house-hunting. As I went into the meeting, the Lord whispered in my ear that He had a work for me to do there and that if I was willing He would be with me. On the way out of the meeting He spoke again, telling me to go and look at one particular house. To my delight and amazement, the house in question had come on the market just two days previously. It was ideal for our purposes – and the price was identical to our own in Chester. Eleven hectic weeks later we had moved to Ludlow.

For Reflection

Although it is by no means automatic that we will experience a ‘dark night of the soul,’ it is important to be able to recognize one. The following poems help to sharpen our understanding of God’s purposes during these dark times.

Light Shining out of Darkness

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain:
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.
(William Cowper)

The Hound of Heaven

‘All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might’st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child’s mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come . . .’
Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
‘Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.’
(Francis Thompson)

Selah

Lord, You see us in our times of utter darkness and despair – but You see beyond them to the wonderful things You have in store for us. Thank You, Father, that You will keep our hearts focused on seeking You. Guard us from the deceptions and distractions that tug at our soul. Use us, Lord, to remind others that their darkness, too, will lift – and to encourage them to hold fast to the Lover of their souls. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

1.

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Chapter Nine **Overcoming Condemnation**

The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved: loved for ourselves, or rather loved in spite of ourselves.

(Victor Hugo)

THE DEVIL NOT ONLY HATES OUR INTIMACY with God – he fears it. If he cannot push our soul off course into deception, then he will assuredly try to persuade us that there is something wrong with us! Envious that we are heading towards the place from which he has been excluded, our invisible enemy will try everything he can to frustrate our pilgrimage and to hinder our fruitfulness. Which of us has not experienced Satan's minions torturing our minds with thought attacks that are perfectly geared to exploit our particular weak spots?

Before I wrote this book, the Lord urged me to teach on some of the enemies of intimacy. George Verwer, the founder of Operation Mobilization, considers condemnation to be the number one weapon the enemy uses against believers. Facing this foe therefore merits a chapter in its own right. Whereas persecution often drives us as Christians closer to each other, an inner sense of worthlessness merely makes us feel isolated and despairing.

Alex Buchanan speaks of Satan shining a magnifying glass intensely on some particular issue, which he then distorts and enlarges to the point where we find it difficult to concentrate on anything else. Bob Gass put it this way:

A thought left to ramble in your mind can attach itself to an incident in your past. It will begin to feed on that incident and grow like a virus. The stronger it gets, the weaker you become, until your strength has been drained away by lust or resentment or fear. The thought you left unchecked today can become a stronghold tomorrow. Paul says we must take these thoughts captive before they take us captive.¹

The Roots of Condemnation

But I said, 'I have laboured to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due to me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God.'

(Isaiah 49:4)

In one sense, all temptation and condemnation is aimed against God. Since the devil cannot attack the Lord directly, he attempts to wound Him indirectly by hurting His children. We need a vigorous defence. When the devil dredges up matters from our past, or torments us with some fear, it is vital that we lift up the shield of faith. These thoughts do not belong, but we do – to our Lord!

Temperament and character play a large part in how well we handle condemnation. What one person can reject without difficulty may be a serious battle for another. Perfectionists, and those who are unduly hard on themselves, are especially prone to condemnation.

A condemning upbringing has much to answer for. The endless put-downs we endure at the hands of critical parents, pastors, teachers or school mates become in time an internalized voice that counterfeits the voice of the Lord. Inevitably, this accumulated deadweight leaves us feeling that whatever we do will never be good enough. Such thoughts are like trip wires which the powers of darkness carefully position for us to stumble over.

For many of us, the end result of being criticized and condemned is that we allow a hard shell of judgement to form around our hearts. This leads us to reject many people and situations that threaten our emotional insecurities, but which actually could have done us much good had we handled them better. We need to renounce all the patterns of criticism and control we have inherited or developed, and to pray instead for increased humility and discernment.

Whatever the specific ways by which condemnation assails us, Satan's intention is always the same: to misrepresent the character of God to us, and to accuse us within the privacy of our own hearts. To this end he often sets out to blame us for things for which we are not even remotely responsible.²

Condemnation often strikes in direct proportion to the importance of a task we are engaged in. We feel the full force of the devil's fury against us as we set out to fulfil the work of the Lord – or when we are already weary from having done it. Like gusty squalls on a stormy night, his spiteful shafts hammer and probe at the entrance to our mind. 'Where have we gone wrong?' we groan, ashamed to confess aloud the terrible thoughts and feelings that are plaguing us.

Condemnation turns us in on ourselves, and wrongly makes us assume that no one else could sympathize with our predicament. This is when we must reach out for help. The temptation is to feel 'I am too young, too old, or too insignificant to ask for help' – or, alternatively, 'I am supposed to be a mature Christian; I can't ask anyone to help me with this problem!' By keeping these struggles to ourselves we merely sentence ourselves to more of these monotonous refrains that churn around our minds.

The Lord can use us to help each other. During one of her husband's periodic bouts of

depression, Martin Luther's wife came downstairs one day dressed in mourning clothes. When her husband asked her who had died, she replied, 'Martin, you've been acting as if God had died!' Her dramatic ploy jolted Luther out of his self-pity.

Appropriate sharing keeps us in a healthy state of emotional honesty. Few things will so aid our spiritual growth as having a soul-friend to share these matters with. To rephrase a popular commercial, 'The prayers of others reach the parts our own cannot reach!'

Negotiating the Mind-Field

If we happen to be one of the relatively few Christians who do not suffer much from condemnation (or who have largely managed to overcome it) we are still bound to meet many people who suffer from its crippling pangs. It is important that we guide them aright. We are facing an informed and intelligent opponent, whose unswerving aim is to control the mind of mankind. To that end he deploys a wide variety of forces, including extremes of both behaviour and belief, as well as spiritual deceptions of all kinds.

Mercifully, the Accuser of the brethren is not omniscient – but he does have access to our track record. The 'father of lies' scours our past in order to see which of our many unkind words and foolish actions he can use against us. As a master propagandist he knows which thought-patterns and fears, as well as which circumstances, are most likely to upset us.

This is not a game; it is the centre-stage of our spiritual warfare. It is a great mistake if we hold back or are put off from doing something because of flashbacks to some past hurt or failure. As the old Chinese saying puts it, 'We cannot stop birds from flying over our head, but we do not need to let them nest in our hair.' Satan knows how to spin a good yarn, but since he is nothing but a liar, why should the particular fear that we are experiencing now be right? It pays to 'doubt our doubts', and to dispute the devil's right to disrupt our lives.

Somebody once described the battle this way: 'God is always voting for us; the devil is always voting against us, but it is how we vote which decides who wins!' Simply recognizing what is going on and who we are dealing with is half way to victory.

Unfounded fears lie at the root of much of our unhappiness. Some years ago, the devil concocted what I can only describe as a nightmare scenario in my mind. It was overwhelmingly persistent and plausible, and led to a time of acute internal agitation. Because I knew that such things had happened to other people, I found it impossible to dismiss the thought as being something that could never happen to me. I bound the fear, I praised the Lord; I tried everything I could think of to set myself free, but still the thoughts persisted.

I hesitated initially to share the matter with Rosalind, because I had the uncomfortable feeling that she would consider me foolish to entertain such thoughts. When I did share it with her, my fears were confirmed: she thought it was ridiculous to waste so much energy worrying about something that wasn't even happening! But when she prayed with me about it, things began to change. Rosalind's prayers put a brick through the devil's magnifying glass – but I still need to be careful not to pick up the pieces!

Our Heavenly Advocate

Here is a simple suggestion for dealing with the common but crippling problem of not knowing whether the guilt and confusion we are wrestling with comes from God, the devil or our own unhealed hurts. Should Satan remind us of some sin, let us by all means deal with any truth that may lie hidden in the accusation. God can use even these attacks to deepen the spirit of repentance within us. But then, and with all guns blazing, we must reject Satan's lies, and vigorously deny the insidious half truths that are woven into the accusation. 'Lord, I'm not worthy,' may or may not be the prelude to holiness, but 'Lord, I'm worthless' is the language of condemnation.

Realistically, since many of the deepest hurts and rejections we experience come through our fellow believers, then is it not probable, inevitable even, that some of the things we say and do will cause others to suffer too? The Ascent of Toil makes us more aware of these unkind attitudes, but this does not mean that the Lord Jesus disqualifies us from sharing in the inheritance of the 'Kingdom of light.'³ It grieves and dishonours our Heavenly Father if we fall into the trap of believing that He will set us to one side. Why despair, when our feelings are such an unreliable barometer?

Provided that we have confessed all known sin, then we must call the Accuser's bluff and hold the door of our minds shut against these intrusive thoughts. Our adversary has no legal leg to stand on. There is no condemnation for those who have confessed their sins to the Lord. Satan can only dangle the memory of them before our eyes and hope that we will believe them and become trapped in a slough of despond.⁴

'Flashbacks' are, effectively, a denial that the Lord Jesus has forgiven our past sins and failures. They are also a perversion of a spiritual blessing. During those times when I am closest to the Lord, I am sometimes reminded of particular prayers I have prayed. They remain 'on file' in heaven – not so my mistakes. Sins confessed are not only sins forgiven but also sins forgotten: blotted out and buried in the sea of God's forgiveness. I like the attitude taken by John Vianney and Francis of Paola:

Pardon one another so that later on you will not remember the injury. The recollection of an injury is in itself wrong. It adds to our anger, nurtures our sin and hates what is good. It is a rusty arrow and poison for the soul.

The way to overcome the devil when he excites feelings of hatred for those who injure us is immediately to pray for their conversion.⁵

Forgiveness is ever a choice against our natural instincts. It is the most distinctively Christian form of love we can demonstrate towards those who we do not naturally get on with. Exercising forgiveness is proof that the love of God is at work within us. We may never particularly like the people who have hurt us, and we may still have to suffer the consequences of what they have done to us, but when we put forgiveness in motion we are setting loose the most powerful force in the universe.

Some would say that it is easier to rise to a Christ-like level of forgiveness of one's murderer, executioners or torturers than it is to forgive those who try us in small ways, every day. Forgiveness

within the family is a stringent test.⁵

Some of us also need to be more willing to forgive ourselves. If we do not, we may find that we read the Bible and view God Himself through the shattered image of our sense of alienation.

This is when the very means by which the Lord desires to communicate with us becomes a source of further condemnation to our soul. How does this come about? By the devil first planting and then watering seeds of doubt and unbelief.

But what about those times when we pray for something to change, and nothing happens? We could hardly expect the devil to resist so tempting a target. Whenever we are faced with such a situation we can almost hear him whispering: 'God didn't care enough about you to help you overcome your problems then. You'll never win through!' Affirming the opposite of these lies and suggestions is still our best form of defence – and it thwarts the enemy's intentions.

Another means I have found to be effective is to take my fears to the Lord Jesus, who is our heavenly advocate.⁶ This is particularly helpful on those occasions where we simply do not know whether what we are feeling is right or wrong. Then we can pray along these lines:

Lord Jesus, I don't know if this thing that I am doing (or feeling) is right or wrong; but if it is wrong, I ask You to show me, and to save me from it – and if it is right, to bless and anoint it. Whatever happens, I ask that I shall in no way be ashamed, nor be the cause of shaming others. Thank You, Lord, that You can turn even the attacks of the evil one around for good. In Jesus' name, Amen.

For Reflection

Overcoming the power behind condemnation opens the way for faith to flow more freely in our hearts. Are there times when experience has shown that you are most at risk from troublesome thoughts? Is there anything practical you can do to avoid them? Do they come because you have not dared to believe that God has really forgiven you for things you have done in the past? Or because you yourself are holding on to some resentment or unforgiveness?

Selah

Lord Jesus, help me during the many times when disturbing thoughts torture my mind, and I feel oppressed by my foes. Thank You that You endured far more than I will ever have to do, first in the wilderness and then in the Garden of Gethsemane. Thank You that You have not given me a spirit of timidity, 'but a spirit of power, of love and of self-control.' Grant me grace to stand on Your word and to resist the devil's lies. I come against these shafts of condemnation now in the power of Christ, and I pray that You will help me to speak out words of grace and encouragement. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

1.

See 2 Corinthians 10:5. Quoted from *The Word for Today*, an outstanding devotional booklet published quarterly by United Christian Broadcasters. It is available without charge from U.C.B., P.O. Box 255, Stoke on Trent, ST4 8YY, UK.

2.

Many who were abused in childhood feel they must have been in some way responsible for what happened. They carry this false guilt with them throughout their lives – often with disastrous effects on

their marriages. It is likewise common to find that children who were not wanted received insufficient nurture in their souls and touch in their bodies. They grow up seriously lacking in confidence and motivation, possessing little resistance with which to face life's setbacks.

3.

Colossians 1:12-14; 1 John 3:19-23.

4.

Romans 8:1, cf Zechariah 3:1; Revelation 12:10. The book of Nehemiah likewise reveals a number of examples of false accusations being directed against God's servants.

5.

Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Saints*, Jill Haak Adels (O.U.P.).

6.

1 John 2:1, cf Romans 8:1, 14:22. Problems with self-esteem are by no means limited to adults. For a look at the subject from a teenage perspective, you might like to read *Who do you think you are?* by Steve Mawston (Scripture Union).

Chapter Ten

The Principle of Suffer-Reign

Nothing is more to be feared, than too long a peace. You are deceived if you think that a Christian can live without persecution. A storm puts a man on his guard and obliges him to exert his utmost efforts to avoid shipwreck.

(Jerome)¹

IF THIS WERE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, I would feel obliged to record the many mistakes and worse which lie strewn along the banks of my pilgrimage. Only profound repentance, and the Lord's mercy have made it possible for me to continue in the grace of God. It is probably much the same in your life too.

Our sufferings fall broadly into the same categories we considered when looking at the different sorts of wilderness. There are those which come as the result of our own stupidity (especially where there has been insufficient repentance); those we suffer at the hands of our unseen enemies; those we endure during times of prolonged difficulty, and finally those which in no way can be deemed our own fault.

Quick though we may be to applaud the martyrs who *did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death*,² we must face the fact that so long as things are going well for us, we rarely have much time or inclination to identify with people in distress. *Men at ease have contempt for misfortune*, lamented Job (Job 12:5). No wonder Paul wrote from his dank prison cell to remind the Philippians that it has been granted to us not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for Him.³ *If we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.*

(Romans 8:17)

Once the Lord opens our eyes, we will find references to suffering everywhere in Scripture.⁴ Paul

urged Timothy to endure his hardships in the same spirit the Lord Jesus had done, promising that *If we endure we will also reign with Him*. Some translations prefer *If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him*.⁵ Perhaps we ought to spell the word suffering ‘suffer-reign!’

This verse points us to the fact that suffering and the cross are central to the New Testament. In stark contrast to today’s easy-believism (in which God is ‘marketed’ as being the solver of all our problems), converts in the Early Church were taught to expect that they would enter the Kingdom of God through many hardships and tribulations.⁶ So far from encouraging gloomy morbidity, the overwhelming impression we are left with from reading the Acts of the Apostles is that of a joyous and contagious faith which has experienced much suffering, but which considers it of little consequence when compared with the surpassing joy of knowing Christ.

Suffering can mould and mellow us into the likeness of our crucified Saviour, and drive out our preoccupation with trivia. Even a taste of such suffering can make us far more sympathetic and prayerful. But there is nothing automatically ennobling about this process: it can also make us bitter and cynical.⁷

The New Testament points us to the radical thought that effective Christianity and suffering go hand in hand. Paul described his longing to *know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings*. (Philippians 3:10.) We can trace a clear gradation here in Paul’s desire. Having come to know Christ, he experienced His power flowing through him. Finally, he reached the point where his love for God, and his longing for his fellow men combined to make him willing to suffer any tribulation for their sake.

This verse provides us with a privileged insight into the heart of one who proved daily that he was not afraid to suffer for his faith. Far from making him retreat into a ‘safer’ practice of his faith, Paul used his sufferings as a means of identifying yet more fully with his Lord.⁸ For while there are certain forms of distress that are common to all – illnesses, bereavements, partings and disappointments of many kinds – there is a deeper level of suffering which can only be embraced voluntarily. Tozer, challenging on this as on most other subjects writes:

God will not force this kind of suffering on us, nor embarrass us with riches we do not want. Such a cross is reserved for those who apply to serve in the legion of the expendables, who love not their lives unto death, but who volunteer to suffer for Christ’s sake, and follow up their application with lives that invite the fury of hell . . . The marks of the cross are upon them and they are known in heaven and hell. But where are they? Has this breed of Christian died out upon the Earth? Have the saints of God joined the mad scramble for security? Are we now afraid to suffer and unwilling to die? I hope not, but I wonder.⁹

Job’s Sufferings

The book of Job is a powerful rebuke to theological know-it-alls. Job’s counsellors made the mistake of assuming that there must be an earthly reason for their friend’s sufferings. This misunderstanding led them to make many hurtful and ill-judged accusations.

Elihu came nearer the mark when he declared that God allows us to be ‘chastened on a bed of pain’ in order to perceive our wrong-doings. He commented perceptively that those who suffer

the Lord delivers in their suffering, and speaks to them in their affliction. He is wooing us from the jaws of distress to a spacious place!¹⁰ But because Elihu, like the others, was unaware of Job's true standing with God (and of what Satan had been allowed to do) his counsel too was flawed.

How often the Lord must have longed to intervene and put an end to the terrible tribulations that were assailing Job from every quarter. He must have longed to shout out, 'Hold on Job! When you get through this time of testing you'll come out much the stronger. Just hang on in there.' When God reveals Himself in the stunning final chapters of the book, He makes no effort to provide anything approaching a reasoned philosophical explanation for Job's appalling sufferings. Instead, we find Him speaking about animals that cannot be tamed: crocodiles, wild oxen, mountain goats and the like. Man's natural inclination is to ignore or to kill such animals, because they cannot be harnessed for any 'useful' purpose. Many indeed, are hostile to men – but God is clearly championing His creation in a way which forces us to consider that He must have a place even for the 'untameable' in the ordering of His universe.

Even those sufferings which appear so inexplicable at the time lie encompassed within the assurance:

All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of His covenant.
(Psalm 25:10)

The Way of the Cross

During the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness, He experienced intense and specific assaults. When these temptations failed to deter Him from His mission, the powers of darkness broadened the scale of their attacks by putting it into the minds of the Pharisees that He must be casting out demons by the hand of Beelzebub.¹¹ Labelling Jesus evil made it easier for them to justify pursuing Him to the cross. Cults and despots always attempt to justify their most extreme actions by branding opponents as 'evil', thereby making them appear lawful targets.

The devil hoped that by subjecting Jesus to the shattering indignities of a trial before a corrupt and prejudiced court, He would be driven by the intense physical and mental pain to retaliate against those who were treating Him so brutally, and, more important still, to give up on His mission to save the world. Mercifully, his plan failed. Longing, as any one of us would, to avoid the agony He knew He had to face, the Lord Jesus did the highest thing a man can do: He turned from His own dread and yielded Himself afresh to what He knew to be His Father's will.

There is nothing mawkish or sentimental about the love of God. Even when hanging on the cross, Jesus' concern was not a burning desire for revenge, but to forgive those who had done such terrible things to Him. He was concerned for their eternal well-being, and for the welfare of His mother. It is the ultimate example for us to contemplate as we go through times of intense suffering at the hands of men and demons.

After the Resurrection, the Lord Jesus opened up the Scriptures to the two who were walking with Him. We see Him here for the first time looking back on His sufferings. *This is what is written*, He explained to them: *The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day* (Luke 24:46). In their heart of hearts, the disciples had perhaps harboured a secret hope that Jesus had

not meant what He said. Later they realized that it had all been necessary.

The grace of God is always available to help us in every possible way, but Jesus never encouraged us to pin our ultimate hopes for happiness in this world alone. He taught rather that here we have no permanent home. Because Satan is recognized as the god of this world, there will inevitably be battles and suffering ahead.¹²

In the early days of the Church, Christians tried hard to be loyal citizens of the Empire. The crunch came when Caesar ordered them to affirm publicly, 'Caesar is Lord!' This they could not do. Historians have found it puzzling that some of the most enlightened emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian for instance, were at the fore in persecuting the believers. Perhaps it was their very vigour which made them demand a degree of allegiance that no true Christian could give to an Empire which boasted that it would never end.

Bishop Polycarp was one of the many who paid the ultimate price for taking his stand for the King of Kings. When the Bishop was promised that his life would be spared if he declared 'Caesar is Lord,' he made the memorable reply: 'For eighty six years I have been the servant of Jesus Christ, and He has never done me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?'

Given the ever present reality of such suffering, Paul beseeches us not to become engrossed in the things of this world.¹³ It is, as he himself knew only too well, easy to think that we are trusting the Lord, when all we are really doing is relying on favourable circumstances.

When the Lord Jesus warned Peter that he would one day suffer martyrdom for his Lord, it may have sounded as though He was promising John, the beloved disciple, an easier life. The Lord's reply to Peter's question appears stern: *What is that to you? You must follow Me* (John 21:20-23). Perhaps it had to be that way to prevent Peter from spending the rest of his life puffed up with self-aggrandizement because of the mighty privileges Jesus had bestowed on him. How could Peter have known then the immense sufferings the Lord had reserved for John in his old age, in exile on the island of Patmos? Neither do we know what hidden sufferings may be in store for those we so foolishly envy or look down on.

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

(Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

Richard Wurmbbrand, who suffered unspeakable atrocities at the hands of his Romanian torturers for fourteen long years, was once asked if he did not resent us in the West for having suffered so little. Richard immediately pointed out that we have suffered in the West – in our minds if not in our bodies. For if the texts we have considered thus far appear to hint primarily at physical opposition, we can by all means extend their meaning to encompass all forms of suffering. The prophecy that the Lord Jesus would be a man of sorrows implies mental as well as physical pain.¹⁴ Reading Mark's gospel recently, I was struck by just how much pressure the Lord Jesus was constantly under. Quite apart from facing the hostility of the authorities, the needs of the sick were so pressing that He and His disciples frequently had next to no time in which to eat, and

little opportunity to rest. Beyond these physical and draining aspects of His ministry lay His constant concern for the well-being of a shepherdless nation.

Do we, too, not feel a constant ache at being surrounded by those who are unable to share in the riches we have found in Christ? Most of us experience at least some measure of hostility from those who do not know the love of God. It is even more hurtful when it is directed against us by other Christians! We must offer it all to the Lord, who understands our pain, but who uses even the most troublesome events and relationships to forward our inward pilgrimage. Nearly a thousand years ago, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote these challenging words:

If ever there should be a congregation without a troublesome and bad-tempered member, it would be necessary to find one and pay him his weight in gold because of the great profit that results from this trial, when good use is made of it.¹⁵

I suspect that most of us are not used to viewing difficult relationships in quite that light! What a difference it would make if we in leadership were prepared to heed the challenges of those who make true and just observations, without in any way seeking to dispute or overthrow our authority as leaders.

Perspectives on Suffering

I compare the troubles which we have to undergo in the course of the year to a great bundle of fagots, far too large for us to lift. But God does not require us to carry the whole at once. He mercifully unties the bundle, and gives us first one stick, which we are to carry today, and then another, which we are to carry tomorrow, and so on. This we might easily manage, if we would only take the burden appointed for each day; but we choose to increase our troubles by carrying yesterday's stick over again today, and adding tomorrow's burden to the load, before we are required to bear it.

(John Newton)

We saw in 'The Dark Night of the Soul' that many of God's finest servants go through periods of feeling abandoned. John the Baptist's confident declaration, *Behold the Lamb of God!* felt like a dim and distant memory after he had spent a prolonged spell in the gloomy fortress of Machaerus. John was plagued by the thought that he had got it all wrong. The message he sent to Jesus reads pitifully: *Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?* (Luke 7:19).

Jesus' reply left room for faith, just as many of His answers to our own troubled questions do.¹⁶ He wanted to rekindle the faith of His doubting servant by helping him see that He was fulfilling the Messianic verses, and that He was indeed the One John had originally supposed Him to be. It is usually the Lord's way to point us towards the truth, rather than to overwhelm us with convincing proofs.

Watchman Nee was forced to copy out communist tracts by hand during the twenty-five years he spent in prison. He died almost as soon as he was released. There indeed was a godly man consigned to spend his days in futility – yet all the while his Christian writings were bearing fruit around the world, enriching the lives of countless thousands. What prayers that man prayed for the growth of the Church in China during those years – and how spectacularly they are being answered in our own day!

Here we see a man being prepared to rule and reign in a higher sphere, in eternity. Neither is his example by any means unique in the annals of the Church in China. Remarkable stories are coming out of that country, both of appalling suffering and of God's miraculous power at work among His people.¹⁷

The picture of Jesus standing at the right hand of God to welcome Stephen is an image for us to meditate on. As the gospel has spread around the globe, so too has the opposition. More people have died as martyrs during the twentieth century than during the preceding nineteen put together. The devil knows that his time is short, and is raging furiously, greatly increasing the pressure in one country after another.

A boat that is being tossed in the ocean swell can still catch many fish. In some mysterious way, suffering and fruitfulness often go hand in hand. I witnessed an example of this when Billy Graham visited Oxford. (He was suffering at the time from a painful broken rib). A group of anarchists burst into the Town Hall, shouting and releasing fire extinguishers. The sense of evil was almost tangible, but God was not thwarted. Far more people committed their lives to the Lord that night than on any other – and all this despite the dreadful atmosphere.

Much suffering, of course, will remain a mystery. Why were so many of the Lord's prophets slain by Jezebel, while Elijah was fed by ravens? Why, for that matter, was James beheaded while Peter was miraculously delivered?¹⁸ It would be naive to assume that Peter had more faith than James.

What we do know is that we are not alone in our sufferings. Countless Christians around the world are experiencing similar trials, and drawing on precisely the same strength as we do. If we are sometimes tempted to think 'Why should such a lovely person have to suffer so much?' we need only wonder how our Heavenly Father felt as He watched His only Son being tortured to death at a religious festival that was supposedly convened in order to worship Him. He is no stranger to affliction, and it is not for us to mistrust His design.

Let Nothing be Wasted

After the five thousand had been fed, and the disciples were gathering up the remaining loaves and fishes, the Lord Jesus declared, *Let nothing be wasted* (John 6:12). He was showing here that God's provision is more than adequate and that every offering can be used in the Kingdom of God. The Lord is able to weave the apparently dark and disconnected threads of our life into something gloriously coherent. God is working to *bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ, when the times will have reached their fulfilment* (Ephesians 1:10).

From the depths of the persecution against Christians in communist Russia I came across an extraordinary testimony. An atheist, disputing furiously with a pastor in a railway carriage, seized the pastor's precious Bible and hurled it out of the window. We can only imagine the pastor's dejection in that Bible-starved land. Some weeks later there came a knock on his door: not the dreaded KGB, but a group of workers asking to be baptized. The leader of the men told the bemused pastor how he had been working by a railway line some time ago when a book – the pastor's Bible – was flung out of a train. The man had become a Christian through reading it, and so too had the friends he had brought along. Who but God could have brought so much

good out of an episode that had begun so badly?

A Chinese woman had a poster placed on the outside of her house throughout the traumatic years of the Cultural Revolution. The notice branded her as a lunatic evangelical, and warned people to keep away from her. She felt her isolation acutely. At the end of that terrible period, however, people flocked to her for counsel because the poster had convinced them of the genuineness of her faith! Thus the Lord was able to use the instrument of her humiliation as His means of salvation to others. Isn't this again a picture of the cross?

In the history of the Early Church, the Lord often intervened not just to give His children grace to endure, but to rescue them as well.¹⁹ He has not changed. We have heard modern day stories of widows' cruses; of a bowlful of rice, for instance, that continued to feed young Chinese children whose parents had been taken from them.²⁰ In an example which parallels the ravens supplying Elijah with food, rats brought sweet potatoes to a man in prison who had been condemned to die of hunger. Truly, God provides all that is necessary for those who trust in Him – and at just the right time.

The deliverances that we read about in Acts chapters five and twelve are truly miraculous, but we can never be certain how the Lord will work in any given situation. The drawback of hearing too many such stories is that we run the risk of building a teaching on 'how to escape from prison with the help of angels!'

If suffering reduces us, as it so often did the psalmists, to little more than crying out to God for grace and strength to cope with the next half hour, then let us take heart: God hears our cries and draws close to help. In the meantime, it is comforting to know that we have One who is able to identify with every situation that we will ever have to go through. To realize that God is with us in the midst of our sufferings makes all the difference between merely being a survivor and being an overcomer. He will always provide a way forward for us.²¹

For most of us, it is not that our trials are too large, but rather that our love is too small. The Bible urges us to look beyond our own immediate circumstances and to *remember those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering* (Hebrews 13:3).²² It is precisely this degree of identification which empowers our prayer-life. Why not ask the Lord to lead you to meet and to pray for those who are suffering? May He give you words of encouragement for them, and prayers that bring release.

For Reflection

We put ourselves to all sorts of inconveniences to satisfy our guilty passions but when it is a question of overcoming them we will not lift a finger. It is just this penny's worth of suffering that nobody wants to spend.

(Leonard of Port Maurice)²³

It is not always easy to know when we are suffering for the Lord, and when merely as the consequence of our own recklessness. It is easy to think, 'If only I hadn't been so proud or angry or careless this need never have happened!' Most of us can look back over our lives and see a tangled litter of abortive or erroneous paths – to say nothing of words and actions which have

caused others a degree of pain one would have to call unforgivable were it not for the infinite mercy of the cross.

We have faced our sins and shortcomings in earlier chapters. Now, for the moment, may I encourage you to leave them as it were to one side, and to see your sufferings instead as a privileged sharing in the suffering of Christ. Try to follow the advice of Francis de Sales: Raise up your heart after a fall, sweetly and gently, humbling yourself before God in the knowledge of your misery. Do not be astonished at your weakness. It is not surprising that weakness should be weak, infirmity infirm and frailty frail.²³

Selah

Lord, I recognize that the spiritual battle in this generation is strong. Grant grace today to all Your servants who are suffering a backlash from the enemy for their obedience to You. Keep them from despair when doors shut in their faces. Help them to trust You to open new and better ones for them. Thank You that no situation is beyond the reach of Your help, and that there are no limits to Your power. Bring about great deliverances today to delight Your heart, and to confound Your enemy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

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2.

Revelation 12:11.

3.

Philippians 1:29.

4.

E.g. Mark 9:12; 1 Peter 2:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:12; John 16: 1-4,33; Mark 13:13.

5.

2 Timothy 2:11-12; Romans 8:17-18; cf Isaiah 63:9.

6.

John 16:1-4; Acts 14:22; cf 1 Thessalonians 3:2-5; 2 Timothy 2:1-3; 1 Peter 2:21-23; 5:8-9; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Corinthians 12:7; Matthew 5:10-11.

7.

See also 1 Peter 3:9, 12-14; 4:1-2; 5:10.

8.

On more than one occasion Paul listed the sufferings that had come his way because of his missionary activity. The epistles bear eloquent witness to Paul's sufferings. 2 Corinthians 11:23-30 shows how selective Luke had been in drawing up his account of Paul's ministry, since we have no other information about many of the incidents alluded to here. Paul wrote from prison: *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.* (Philippians 1:12, cf 2 Corinthians 1:8-11; 6:4-10; 11:23-30; Colossians 1:24; Romans 9:1-3,10:1; 1 Peter 1:7; James 1:3; Job 1:6-12, 2:1-6 14).

9.

The Root of the Righteous (Christian Publications Inc., Harrisburg, PA). Tozer's publications provide rich seams of spiritual challenge and wisdom. Kingsway's publication *The Best of Tozer* is a good starting place for discovering this unique man's writings.

10.

Job 36:15-16.

11.

Matthew 12:24-27.

12.

Luke 24:46. See also John 15:18-20; Mark 13:11-13; Hebrews 13:5-6; Romans 5:3-4; James 1:2-4; Revelation 2:10, 3:10, 13:10.

13.

1 Corinthians 7:31.

14.

Isaiah 53:3.

15.

Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Saints*, Jill Haak Adels (O.U.P.).

16.

Matthew 11:3-5. The faith of many of the early reformers was likewise shaken by the extreme deprivations they were subjected to.

17.

Lilies Among Thorns (Sovereign World) is a powerful testimony to the sufferings and the glory of the contemporary Church in China.

18.

Acts 12:1-11.

19.

E.g. Acts 5:19-20, 12:5-11, 16:22-36; cf Daniel 4:24-25.

20.

God's Smuggler to China Brother David (Hodder and Stoughton) pp 295-6.

21.

1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 4:14-16.

22.

See also 1 Corinthians 12:25b-26, Romans 8:31-39, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 and Hebrews 13:12-14.

23.

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Chapter Eleven **Beyond Striving**

I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind — Then I considered all that my hands had done, and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind — Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

(Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:11; 4:6 K.J.V.)

IF YOU ARE INCLINED TO SUPPOSE that everyone else is much better integrated and more 'together' than you are, then you will be able to identify with these sombre verses from the book of Ecclesiastes. The Ascent of Toil exposes many imperfections in our hearts: frustrated strivings as well as the harmful desires which rob us of the peace of heart the Lord is longing to give us.

The New Testament does enjoin certain kinds of striving on us: for instance, that we should make every effort to share the good news with others, pray at all times, develop our spiritual giftings and maintain the unity of the Body.¹ I am more concerned in this chapter to help us avoid the kind of striving which makes people slaves to demonic forces or to lose their health in their quest to gain power, position and security.

Striving is a particularly deadly enemy of intimacy with God. Our desperate attempts to please others leave us feeling worn-out, not least because the pressure of our concern to know how we are doing robs us of any chance of experiencing true restfulness. As Herbert Swope wrote: 'I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure: try and please everybody!'

It is not our striving that God rewards, but our obedience. Many of us are so preoccupied with our own self-image that we know all too little of this inner freedom. If we are strangers to God's humour, and approach life so seriously that we can never laugh at ourselves, it is a sure sign that our hearts are still striving.

In one of C.S. Lewis' delightful *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan has just created the talking animals. As they get used to the sound of their voices, a jackdaw says something which embarrasses him, and makes the others want to laugh. At first, they try to repress it, but Aslan encourages them: Laugh and fear not, creatures. Now that you are no longer dumb and witless, you need not always be grave. For jokes as well as justice came in with speech.²

I often feel heavy and weary in spirit after a demanding time of ministry. My physical reserves are low, and I find it hard to settle to any sustained work. Once, when I was troubled about this, the Lord reminded me (and by no means for the first time) that there are seasons in the life of the soul, just as there are in nature. Even the Lord Jesus found that there were occasions when the Spirit's power was particularly strong on Him. We should not expect to be able to experience the same high level of blessing day after day.

'Striving to enter God's sabbath rest' as the Book of Hebrews exhorts us sounds like a paradox.³ Many of us find it difficult to allow ourselves these 'fallow' times because we are afraid of being left behind or being considered lazy. We saw earlier how these times of rest can make it easier for us to discern the Spirit's leading. Although it may feel as useless as leaving a field unplanted, vital nutrients are being replenished in our soul through these quieter times.

The trouble with chasing great visions is that we often miss the opportunities that are right in front of us. This does not mean that we should not have clear goals and visions to aim towards: it is simply that we need to cultivate a restful, rather than a competitive attitude of heart. The more open we are to what the Lord has for us from one day to the next, the less we will feel the need to compare ourselves with others.

God loves to use the humble. Their intellects do not get in the way, and the glory goes where it truly belongs. Not that it is easy to be humble: the very act of seeking it can make us profoundly self-centred! Humility tends to develop as a joyful by-product of doing something for someone else.

What a joy it is when we know what we are called to do, and to be at peace about all that we have not been called to do. It may take time, experience and the counsel of friends to bring us to this point, but it is a great relief to discover that we do not have to act (or to hold back) because of the fear of what other people will think or say.

Freedom in Christ

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

(Galatians 5:1)

The Lord Jesus is giving us the freedom to do the specific things He has called us to do. The principal thing that can stop us from achieving this is our own instability. Many of us are so filled with self-loathing that we pass judgements against ourselves which, in turn, fuel self-destructive tendencies. At any moment, these lethal charges can be set off like high explosives, bringing all manner of disquiet not only to ourselves but to all who come too close to us. It is no wonder that publishers are falling over themselves to bring out books on self-acceptance!

Jesus died not only to save us, but to lead and care for us. So much of our striving stems from not believing this, or from trying to be other than we really are. Some of us need consciously to thank the Lord for making us the way we are, lest otherwise we merely feel resentful or envious of others. It is tempting, but not wise, to wish away the circumstances of our life. What good does it do to run away, or to wish that we were someone or somewhere else? Are we not effectively rejecting the Lord if we reject ourselves?⁴

In one of the 'Barbar' cartoons, the elephant king had been feeling his responsibilities so heavily that he wished he no longer had to be king. He was allowed to experience the lot of a commoner, but then watched with horror as another king imposed a tyrannical reign on his kingdom. The elephant's influence had been far more beneficial than he had supposed – just as our own so often is. The script writer was merciful: Barbar was restored to his throne just in time to save the kingdom!

It is no use worrying that we are not converting the world or gaining rapid promotion if God has not given us the ability or the platform to do so. John the Baptist reminds us, *A man can receive only what is given him from heaven* (John 3:27). True, the ceiling of our faith ought to be increasing from one year to another, but if our epitaph matches that of Mary, who poured a jar of perfume over Jesus' head, then we have lived well. Of her it was written, *She did what she could* (Mark 14:8). What a phrase that is to ponder! As we offer God the things we most desire, so He begins to set us free from our emotionally exhausting fears and strivings.⁵

One man, who knew that he was dying, prayed that he might lead at least one person to the Saviour before he was taken home. Not only did he do so, but the man he helped was D.L. Moody, who himself went on to lead thousands into the Kingdom!

At one period in his life, Moody was barred from being a member of his church on the grounds that he would 'never amount to anything much.' Billy Graham was likewise forbidden to preach

at his seminary, because he was considered too poor a communicator for such front-line work!

We can all take heart as we ponder what God has done through people whom the world, and even the Church, branded as failures. The Lord can pick us up one more time than we can fall – and there is no limit to what His grace can accomplish in our soul.

For Reflection

Here are some keys to set us free from the strain of striving:

- A gracious attitude is pleasing to the Lord.
- People matter more than projects and seeking God is more important than winning fame.
- Contentment is an attitude to develop, because it keeps resentment and envy at bay.
- Try to see yourself as the steward, and not the owner, of your gifts and possessions.

Selah

Sovereign Lord, we cry to You that You will set us free from the sin of striving. May our hearts be filled with praise and gratitude, and be empowered to live in peace and freedom. Guide and direct our efforts; renew and strengthen us in Your service, so that we can give You our best.

Help us to look for Your hand in the circumstances that hinder us, and in the people who irritate us. Grant us discretion in the way we discuss these people and these situations, and the love that bears and conquers all things. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

1.

See Romans 15:30; 1 Corinthians 14:12; Colossians 1:29; 1 Timothy 4:10; cf 2 Timothy 2:24 (K.J.V.): *The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient.*

2.

C.S. Lewis *The Magician's Nephew* (Fount) If you have not yet had the pleasure of discovering *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series of six books for children, I heartily commend them to you.

3.

See Hebrews 4:9-11.

4.

We can trace this cycle with alcoholics, who drink to make themselves feel good, only to plunge into a further sequence of shame and guilt which compounds the original problem – their low self-esteem. Many fall into sexual immorality, or some other serious sin, out of a desire to escape from this crippling sense of inadequacy. By seeking happiness and safety in some other direction – usually in the mistaken hope that it will involve fewer commitments and responsibilities – all they end up doing is inflicting endless suffering on themselves and others.

5.

John and Paula Sandford have excellent wisdom on the whole subject of what they call 'Performance Orientation' in their book *The Transformation of the Inner Man* (Bridge).

Chapter Twelve

The Grace of Yielding

I can love you more than you can love yourself, and I watch over you a thousand times more carefully than you can watch over yourself. The more trustfully you give yourself up to Me, the more I shall be watching over you; you will gain a clearer knowledge of Me and experience My love more and more joyfully.

(Catherine of Sienna)¹

THE PRINCIPAL TEMPTATION WE FACED on our long climb uphill to the fell tops was to give up and retrace our steps. The feeling continued to plague us until we had almost reached the Broad Open Spaces. There will be many temptations to quit in the course of our pilgrimage – but who knows what the Lord will bring about if we will only keep going?

We saw in ‘The Principle of Suffer-Reign’ that those who seek to follow the Lord sometimes have to go through extraordinary tests of faith. The nonconformist preacher, John Bunyan, imprisoned in Bedford Jail for his faith, was informed that he could be released immediately if he agreed not to hold any more public meetings.

Bunyan was tormented by the love he felt for his family, and in particular for his young blind daughter. He found the pleas of so-called friends, who told him that the stand he was taking amounted to nothing less than dereliction of his duty towards his family, infinitely harder to bear than the poison-tipped offers of the authorities. At a time when he was under the influence of what he later came to characterize as Giant Despair, John Bunyan wrote, ‘I felt as though I was pulling the roof down over my own head, but I must do it, I must.’

Most of us instinctively hope that we will never be put to such a test. When we read that it was God’s will to crush and bruise His only Son (Isaiah 53:10), do we not subconsciously fear that complete submission may lead us too to some sort of a cross? After all, God nowhere promises that it will not. But God honours those who yield to his purposes and follow Him courageously. There are few more important keys to overcoming striving and coping with the Ascent of Toil than this willingness to yield to the Lord. How grateful we can be that John Bunyan did not compromise! It was during his time in Bedford prison that he penned *Pilgrim’s Progress*, perhaps the best known of all Christian classics.²

Beyond Mount Moriah

The more willing we are to yield all that we are and all that we do to the Lord, the easier He will find it to show us His favour. If we hold on too tightly to our activities or position, however, we may find our work for God (rather than God Himself) subtly becoming the all-consuming focus of our life.

We rarely recognize this process happening, because our tongue has learned to parrot the proper language, that ‘God comes first in our lives.’ Our actions, and above all our longings, reveal what is really in our hearts. If some vision comes to assume too great a prominence in our lives, the Lord may have to take away the means of fulfilling it in order to draw our soul back to its first love.

Nearly twenty years ago, while working for a church in Oxford, I was leading a prayer and praise group for students. We met late on Saturday evenings and enjoyed a steady flow of blessing.

Unfortunately, these meetings did not receive official sanction from the rather cautious Christian Union, who were uncomfortable with our charismatic emphasis. While praying one evening, the Lord spoke to me clearly: 'If you will have the courage to close this meeting down, I will make something incomparably better come out of it.'

It takes as much faith to close something down that God is clearly using as it does to start it in the first place. It is a sign of mistrust, however, if we insist on trying to wring every last ounce of blessing out of it, especially if the Lord is urging us to change direction. As Corrie Ten Boom put it 'We must not grasp things too tightly, lest our fingers get hurt when He prises them from us.' Six months later, the Lord gave me freedom to restart the meetings on an alternative day and in our own venue. The grace and power that flowed were of an entirely different order. God had restored the vision – and with increased anointing! Some time later came a call which I shall describe in 'The Paths of Guidance' to resign my post with the church in Oxford and to move in faith to Chester.

My early days there proved to be a particularly narrow and difficult Ascent of Toil. Two years prior to leaving Oxford, a student nurse called Rosalind turned up in a meeting I was leading. Over the months our friendship became a close prayer partnership. By the time we left Oxford it had blossomed into love.

In contrast to earlier whirlwind romances, the Lord reined back our emotions in the early stages, in order to develop a strong bond of friendship between us. The Lord had restrained us both so effectively in previous relationships, that we dared not rush ahead without being quite certain of His will for us. One evening, about a week before I was due to move to Chester, the Lord spoke to us simultaneously, telling us not to see, write or even ring each other again unless or until He specifically permitted us to.

The Lord's edict was like a mini Mount Moriah. Offering up our 'Isaac' on the altar, we had to die to the hope that God might be giving us to each other. Faithful to the Lord's commission, Rosalind drove me to Chester, attended a service in the church I was to be based in and then set off to Nottingham where she was to train as a midwife. As far as we could tell, God had brought our relationship to an untimely end. He gave us no assurance that He would bring us together again, but He did encourage us to keep a journal during our separation.

The Lord chose Chester carefully to be His 'desert' for me. In stark contrast to the active ministry I had exercised in Oxford, I knew virtually nobody when I arrived, and nobody knew me. The Lord knew that I was not ready to sustain a more withdrawn lifestyle for very long, and in the meanwhile He had other purposes in mind anyway. The ministry expanded, both to the churches in Chester and around the nation, until life became so busy that we found ourselves longing to be in a quieter place where I could devote myself more fully to praying and writing, as well as to the wider ministry.

First, however, the Lord had some important things to do in my heart. It was there, in my top-floor flat, overlooking the River Dee, that I had my first real taste of the contemplative life. Through the pain of being separated from Rosalind, my emotions were softened to the point where I could feel more sensitively for people in need. Although I often chafed against the sense of loss, God was forging a new calling in my heart.

The outcome was one of abundant mercy. Having genuinely handed over our feelings for each other, and lived through the turmoil that this brought, the Lord released us some three months later to see each other again. We discovered through our journals how closely our prayers had been 'tracking', as we had prayed for people and countries around the world.

The Lord is an eminent psychologist. If something precious is taken from us, we are much less likely to take it for granted if it is subsequently restored to us. We can never be too grateful that He has given us back to each other. We are also thankful that the Lord grounded our relationship in the first instance on the rock of friendship and prayer. It made the transition to marriage an easy one.

During our time apart, the Lord spoke but one word of illumination concerning this apparently incomprehensible separation: 'I am making a pair of intercessors.' As Dad joked later, 'Like antiques: more valuable as a pair!' We developed the ability to stay close to each other through prayer, something which has stood us in good stead during the many times when one or other of us has been away from home.

Life out of Death

Trials of faith are never easy to bear, but the more willing we are to believe that God is with us, the less pain we will experience. Paul teaches us an unexpected truth: *What you sow does not come to life unless it dies* (1 Corinthians 15:36). Jesus had already illustrated this principle in His teaching: *Unless an ear of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* (John 12:24-25)

To a large extent, these verses remain hidden until such time as they become relevant in our experience. When God causes a seed that has 'died' to sprout again, it can proceed to multiply more or less indefinitely. Take, for example, a minister who developed an exceptionally strong burden to help young people. The time came when this calling led him to the conclusion that he needed to devote his whole life to this work. As he and his wife were driving back from a difficult meeting at his denominational headquarters, at which he had tendered his resignation, they had an appalling accident. His wife was flung from the car and lay lifeless on the side of the road.

Within the space of a few hours this man had lost the two most precious things in his life: his wife and his ministry. It was at this moment of utter desolation that he heard the voice of the Lord more clearly than he had ever known before. 'Will you still follow Me?'³ It was almost identical to the question the Lord Jesus asked Peter at a time when many were turning back because of the cost of following Him. Like Peter, who knew that there was nowhere else for him to turn to, so this man reaffirmed his willingness to follow the Lord, no matter what the cost.

The Lord then spoke to him a second time: 'Pray for your wife.' A desperate battle ensued, before life began to return into his wife's body. Eventually she was fully restored. The man's name? Loren Cunningham. Together with his wife, Darlene, they went on to found *Youth With A Mission*: an organization that has reached millions of young people around the world.⁴

Letting Go

We were down in Cornwall some years ago when we heard about a seven year old girl who was desperately ill. A kidney transplant had failed, septicaemia had set in, together with very high blood pressure and heart failure. Her plight was actually serving as a rallying point for the village. Even those with no previous church connection made a point of attending special services, uniting in prayer for her recovery. The parents themselves had been recently converted, and were clinging on in faith that she would be healed.

Over the next year, the girl's condition worsened. She was transferred to an intensive care unit over a hundred miles away. Her father had to give up his job to help care for her, which brought the additional strain of acute financial shortage. The following year was unremittingly grim.

We visited them again when we were next in the area. We discovered that none of the Christians we spoke to in the church believed any longer that she would be healed. We gently suggested that the time might have come to offer their daughter back to the Lord. As it turned out, events took a dramatic turn and forced the issue. The doctors expected the girl to die that night, and recommended that they made no effort to resuscitate her. The moment of decision had come. After years of struggle, the parents recognized that their daughter had suffered enough. For the first time, they were ready to release her fully to the Lord.

There is a startling sequel to this story. The following day, the girl's condition made a remarkable improvement. The doctor said, 'We don't know how, but she is much better now – it's returned to normal size again!' She is still fit and well now, many years later. I believe it was the parents' act of yielding, together with the prayers of many, which brought about this wonderful transformation.

I wonder if you can sense the nuance that I am trying to communicate? God always responds when He detects an attitude of faith in us, but if we were to see our 'faith' vindicated every time we prayed, might we not subconsciously conclude it was 'our' faith that brought about the miracles? The Lord brings us to the point where we have to acknowledge that even our faith is not enough. Then it is His grace and mercy alone that we are left to celebrate – and all the glory goes to Him.

Beyond Mount Moriah

Learning to receive the unconditional love of the Lord is the antidote to the sort of striving we wrote of in the last chapter. It frees us from always having to try to please others. The more we are able to receive His grace, the more fully we can communicate its wonderful freedom to others. Because we have received what we could not earn (and most certainly did not deserve) we need never fear that we will lose it. This is the confidence which fosters intimacy, and which is characteristic of those who have discovered the Broad Open Spaces.

To the person or church who have gone through a Mount Moriah experience, God can safely fulfil visions and bestow much greater anointing. The testing of our faith has separated us from the risk of allowing the blessings themselves to occupy centre stage in our lives. Moreover, people who have been touched by God in such ways (and there are more of them than one might at first suppose) carry with them the imprint of their heavenly encounter. There is a humility, as well as an authority in their lives that is quite at variance with the brashness of those who are still driven by more carnal ambitions. Touched by eternity, they in turn influence many others.

Every day we must yield ourselves, and the decisions we make, back to the Lord. Shortly before he was martyred on the mission field, Jim Elliot wrote these powerful words: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, in order to gain what he cannot lose.'

Surrendering our desires to the Lord is entirely different from the false assumption that we ought to suppress all our own desires and emotions. The Lord will take and use many of the skills and abilities we offer Him – but not necessarily all of them, and certainly not all the time. When the time is right, the Lord may restore the original vision, and supply all that is needed for it to be fulfilled. Or He may lead us into something comparable, using the ground that has been gained through His dealings with us. In the meantime, the extent to which we are yielded and grateful will determine how content we are.

Towards The Broad Open Spaces

It is the ultimate mystery of humility that He who was from the beginning should have been willing to come to earth and live a life of such complete dependency.⁵ He laid down His life so that we could enter eternal life. As I have already hinted, Rosalind and I have found that the Lord frequently appears to take away something that has meant a great deal to us, only to restore it subsequently in such a way as to bring us to a far deeper appreciation of His purposes. Out of the discipline of disappointment (and the death of our hopes and strivings) flows resurrection power.

It was in 1987 that we first felt the Lord telling us that we would one day have a house in the countryside. Friends endorsed this as a calling, and we were eager to see the vision fulfilled. An opportunity arose and we went all out to acquire just such a property. We felt we had many promises that 'this was it' – but we ended up getting nowhere. We were puzzled and confused. Had God really been in the vision?

A sharp Ascent of Toil followed, which, as we have previously described, brought us to Ludlow, a seven year interim period which in many ways served as the transition point in our ministry. Reaching the place the Lord had in mind for us when He first showed us the vision, however, would incur a yet more arduous Ascent of Toil.

It was early in 1996 that the Lord brought the vision of 'the house in the country' to the fore. Once again we thought we might have found the house the Lord had been speaking about, and set out to acquire it. We had merely to sell our own and the transaction was complete. Late on Good Friday the Lord spoke a clear and sobering word: 'It will not work out as you expect.' Gloom and doom! Three days later we heard that the house we were pursuing had been sold to someone else.

Barely a month later we came across a much more promising property, a large house that required a great deal of attention, but whose potential as a quiet house for the Lord was clear to us. The Lord spoke clearly as we looked around it: 'The finding phase is over; but the buying phase will be extremely difficult!' It was gracious of the Lord to warn us. We encountered many snags and delays before finally, in early 1997, we, together with my parents, were able to move in to the place the Lord had promised so many years before. The renovation is now more or less complete and it is breathtaking. The house, grounds and locality (on the edge of the Long Mynd hills) far surpass our wildest expectations.

Looking back from the far side of our valley of loss we can see how each setback was like a submerged stepping stone that helped us to reach the Broad Open Spaces. We cannot thank Him enough for blocking all our earlier plans – but we do wish we hadn't wasted so much mental energy 'doing a doubting Thomas!'

For Reflection

The path of faith is the way of complete embrace. We dare not allow any 'no-go' areas to remain in our heart. In order that Jesus stays with us, for His glory and our own well-being, we must yield ourselves completely to Him, and finish the work He has given us to do.

I am anxious, however, that this teaching on yielding should not be used as an excuse to quit some project or position when the going gets tough. There are many times when we are called *not* to yield, no matter how strong the temptation may be. To offer up our Isaacs to the knife if the Lord is not calling us to do so would be little short of an act of murder! Those who decide on the spur of the moment (and without proper consultation) to abandon their work, families, or ministry leave a trail of havoc in their wake.

Maturity consists of learning to recognize the appropriate response: when to battle against our unseen foes and the endless difficulties and distractions they send our way, and when it is the Lord Himself who is calling us to yield something to Him. Much depends on the choices that we make. We are wise if we seek the prayerful counsel of trusted Christians.

Selah

Lord Jesus, I ask You to forgive my reluctance to yield to You. I have been trying to preserve my independence and to achieve my goals by my own efforts. I willingly offer You now my most cherished hopes and desires, as well as all my gifts and abilities. They are of no lasting worth unless You own and empower them. Still my heart from its own preoccupations so that I can abide more fully in You. All that I am, and all that I have I give to You, joyfully, unreservedly. Deliver me from my fears and lead me in the ways of eternity. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

1.

Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Saints* Jill Haak Adels (O.U.P.).

I have taken the title for this chapter from an excellent publication of that name by Derek Prince.

2.

It is worth reflecting how recently such persecution was on our shores, directed in turn against the Lollards, Nonconformists, Quakers and Catholics. Pray there may be continuing freedom for the gospel in our nation.

3.

John 6:66-68.

4.

Loren Cunningham, *Winning God's Way* (Front Line Publications) and quoted by permission.

5.

Luke 8:3. God made his Son dependent on others, as can be seen by the group of women who financed His ministry – a radical innovation at a time when women were not expected to play any significant part in a ministry team.

Part Three

The Broad Open Spaces

AS WE VENTURE further along the path of intimacy with the Lord, our awareness of eternity returns and we are again able to sense the Lord's presence and power. Our pilgrimage feels once more like an adventure to enjoy rather than a perplexing ordeal to endure.

By the River of Delights we had basked in the Lord's presence. On the Ascent of Toil our willingness to continue with our walk had been put to the test. When we finally reached the top of our own Lakeland climb we were rewarded by stunning panoramas and the invigorating headiness of fresh mountain air. We had reached the Broad Open Spaces.

Resting on the summit in the warm sunshine, I had a 'mountain-top experience'. The peace of the Lord wrapped me in His presence, and He encouraged me not to be afraid to go further along the path of contemplation. It was a powerful confirmation of a process that had been under way for some time. Far from contradicting my earlier ministry, either as an evangelist or in taking the word of the Lord to the Body of Christ, it simply added a rich new dimension.

On the Broad Open Spaces the Lord honours the refining He has accomplished at an earlier stage of our pilgrimage. We look back and marvel at the ways by which the Lord has led us, and we feel ready to bear greater burdens and to embark on fresh ventures for the Kingdom.

The Broad Open Spaces are a season of great opportunity, but they are also full of potential snares. Just as tufts of grass conceal marshy bogs and ensnare careless walkers on the fell tops, so too in the spiritual realm, we must be careful to keep up our guard, lest pride and complacency creep back in. It takes special grace to exercise spiritual power without it going to our head. In this final section, each chapter develops themes we have touched on earlier. 'The Pace of Life' introduced us to the concept of waiting on the Lord; 'Whispers of His Love' and 'The Paths of Guidance' will focus on how we can discern the Lord's leading more clearly. 'Exploring Silence' prepared us to be able to undertake 'The Art of Burden-Bearing'.

In the Broad Open Spaces, prayer flows freely because our spirits are in tune with the Father's

heart. Like a windmill whose sails begin to turn with the first breath of wind, so our spirits are sensitive to the Lord's prompting to pray for matters far and near.

'Towards a Life of Reflection' likewise prepared us for the final chapter 'Towards Eternity,' which brings our thinking about intimacy with the Lord to a climax and conclusion.

Chapter Thirteen

The Art of Burden-Bearing

No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it to anyone else.
(Charles Dickens)

ONE OF THE FAIREST FRUITS of intimacy with God is to be able to *carry each other's burdens, and in this way fulfil the law of Christ* (Galatians 6:2). It is precious beyond words to join ourselves in spirit with loved ones at times when they are meeting together or are in special need of prayer. When our spirit is untroubled by other worries (admittedly, a big when!) we can feel as close to them as if we were physically in their presence.¹

I am taking it for granted that most of us have read plenty of books about prayer, which frees me from having to go over familiar ground. What is needed is often not just more prayer but rather the ability to enter with faith and imagination into the lives and situations we are concerned about. With the Spirit's help, any of the issues we read, see or hear about can become the raw material for prayer.

In the words of a contemporary hermit, 'An intercessor's heart must be a furnace of love for sinners.' Shutting out all the needs which disturb us will assuredly not help to stoke up the fire within us. Our prayer burdens will be as different as our characters, but if Jesus offered up prayers and petitions with loud tears and cries, then may the Lord give us something of the same zeal!

We thought earlier about the advantage of setting aside Cherith weeks (see page 53). Like an athlete benefiting from long months of training, so we need to sharpen our prayer life by avoiding too much contact with the spirit of the world. A season of more intense prayer, perhaps without food, may do wonders to help us identify with the suffering of people we would not normally even think about. Occasional times without fiction, television, or some other comfort we have come to take for granted may likewise do much to revive a flagging spiritual life – or to enrich an already deep one.

Avid reader of the newspaper that I am, I found it beneficial recently to spend a week without one. I made use of the time instead to pay more attention to the excellent Christian publications I receive. Our primary call is to meet with the Lord and to resist evil; it is not necessarily our duty to know about every issue that the far from Spirit-led media is currently featuring.

As time goes by, we will find ourselves particularly drawn to pray for certain people, places and

professions. We usually pray best and most sincerely for the subjects that are closest to our hearts – but beware of unhealthy biases!

A Way in to Wider Prayer

If you are one of the many who find the thought of praying for wider issues so daunting that you rarely make a start, here is a simple way to approach such subjects.

Suppose, for example, that you want to pray for the education system, but feel intimidated by the size of the topic. Start by praying for one teacher or child whom you know, and take them as representative of the whole group. Pray for them by name. Then move on to pray for the school that they are part of, and then for the other schools in the region. Before you know it, you will find yourselves praying for the whole education system. It is easy to do the same with the Health Service, perhaps by praying first for someone who works in a hospital, or who is currently hospitalized. In such ways, any issue, institution or even nation comes within reach.

Ideally, prayer requires both time and energy, but God is ingenious when time is at a premium. We considered in 'The Pace of Life' how we can use the odd moments during the day, including our times of travelling. We must also learn to respond quickly when the Lord wakes us in the middle of the night, or when we sense that He has a reason for keeping us up late (or waking us early). It is precious to spend time with Him at an hour when there are few distractions around. Spending time with people who are further along the path than ourselves will also help our desire to pray. We are inspired by their fervour and encouraged by their expectation that God will act when they pray.

Strategic Prayer

If strategy is central to success in business and military circles, why should it be any less so in the realm of prayer? After all, if one country is going to invade another, the commander-in-chief does not allow every ship, regiment or squadron of aeroplanes to start fighting when and wherever they feel like it. He concentrates his forces according to a master plan. As Christians we are engaged in serious spiritual warfare. It is important for us to discover the Commander's plan, and to play our proper part in it.

If we do not think 'strategically,' our prayers may quickly degenerate into mere idle longing along the lines of, 'Oh if only the government would show more interest in the unemployed!' Such longings tend to be ineffectual, and lead either to long 'shopping lists', or worse, to naive assumptions that so-and-so is the 'goody' and someone else the 'baddy'. Prayer can all too easily degenerate into a self-righteous condemnation of those who do not think as we do. This does nothing to advance the Kingdom of God.

Our warfare is not against flesh and blood but against intelligent people without bodies: the principalities and powers of darkness. Most traditional church prayers contain little hint of this dimension of spiritual warfare. Perhaps this is because it is naively assumed that the institutions of state will always be used for the maintenance of religion and all good values. Whilst we have much to be thankful for in our nation, we cannot afford to be under any delusions; the prevailing ethos in our society is profoundly ungodly and displeasing to the Lord. The devil has a vested interest in making the state a servant of Mammon, and an instrument of oppression. Churchill's

maxim, ‘constant vigilance is the price for ongoing freedom’ is a reminder of the need to keep on praying for the Lord to watch over our nation during these times of upheaval.

Establishing Lines of Communication

When we are linked by the power of prayer, we, as it were, hold each other’s hand as we walk side by side along a slippery path; and thus it comes about that the harder each one leans on the other, the more firmly we are rivetted together in brotherly love.
(Gregory the Great)²

When we enter the combat zone in the heavenly places we encounter fierce opposition. It is not in the least unusual to find Christian workers labouring under afflictions that go far beyond what we might associate with the Refiner’s fire.³ We saw earlier that, in some mysterious way, the Lord makes use of evil to help us seek Him more wholeheartedly. But Scripture urges us not only to *come near to God* but also to *resist the devil* (James 4:7-8). We will do this much more effectively if we are part of a group which prays for each other. Pastors, and those involved in high-profile spiritual work, are in special need of prayer cover and support.

There is much we can do to help each other. A teacher of religious education came to me one day, deeply distressed about a particular class who were playing her up. Many of the children were actively involved in the occult, and highly cynical about the claims of the gospel. I suggested that she ask her house group to pray for her. She came back the following week beaming. Her class was transformed, and the biggest trouble-makers had been going out of their way to be helpful! Such examples can be multiplied almost endlessly as we learn to harness the power of prayer.

This matter of ‘rounding up’ prayer covering is such a crucial issue that I do not leave it to chance. I know from much experience the difference it makes when I am being prayed for. Physically I am not strong, but times without number I have known extraordinary strength surging through me when I have most needed it. Spiritual gifts likewise come within reach when our prayer covering is in place.

Before embarking on important projects I therefore go to considerable trouble to inform people of what I am planning to do. It is much better if these ‘lines of communication’ are in place before emergencies occur. Then, when a serious situation develops, we know immediately how to mobilize the necessary prayer.

Most of us find it hard to pray when certain distressing situations come our way. It can sometimes be hardest to pray with objective faith for people we are particularly close to. It is enormously releasing if we can find someone who is less emotionally involved than ourselves to pray for these people, because they can do so with much greater faith and objectivity than we are able to do. At other times we can do as much for them in the areas where they struggle.

Guarding the Burden-Bearer’s Timetable

Given the sheer amount of information that comes our way in the course of an average day, it is hardly surprising that our minds sometimes feel overloaded and we begin to suffer from compassion fatigue. We are shocked by the scale of suffering that afflicts the world, and consequently tend to shut out needs and problems we feel we can do nothing about.

The devil is all in favour of this. If he can't stop us praying at all, then he sets out to exhaust us with needs and burdens that we were never meant to take up. As burden-bearers, it is wise to spend time with the Lord before accepting fresh responsibilities and engagements lest our own 'need to be needed' leads us to take on more than we should.

To help us bring our lives into balance, Gordon MacDonald introduces us in *Restoring your Spiritual Passion*⁴ to some of the different types of characters we have to deal with. These include VTPs (Very Trainable People) who we should invest in heavily, VIPs (Very Important People) whose wisdom sharpens our lives, and VDPs (Very Draining People) who have a peculiar way of 'leeching' our time and energies. Gordon warns against allowing such people to take up a disproportionate amount of our time. The devil loves to see us spending huge quantities of time with people we can 'almost' help, instead of being with people we really could help, or be helped by. If we are not careful, we can find ourselves left with insufficient time to befriend the people who would most benefit from our input. Trainable people are often highly sensitive to our perceived busyness, and hold back from imposing themselves on us. It is therefore up to us to sense their hidden giftings, and to go out of our way to spend time nurturing and encouraging them.

This is not to write the VDPs off. By God's grace all and any can change, but it is a call to examine our calendar. Are VDPs dominating our lives? If they are, then we will not be inputting into the strategic VTPs, let alone be receiving nurture ourselves through VIPs. It is worth reflecting that the Lord Jesus walked past many people who were in need. In other words, He did not allow a person's need to automatically dictate His actions. We must also learn to take time out to refresh ourselves when VDPs have exhausted us, and to make the effort to maintain contact with the VIPs who keep watch over us.

Bearing Burdens in the Spirit

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.
(Romans 8:26-27)

Much of the art of burden-bearing centres around the ability to recognize the particular ways in which the Lord brings people to mind whom He would have us pray for. This often happens out of the blue – when we are doing the washing up, or driving along, for instance. It is not in the least unspiritual, however, to make lists of people and subjects we wish to remember regularly in prayer. Carefully chosen topics add structure to our spiritual lives. They jog our woeful memories and focus our wandering minds. I was amused to come across a man who kept a long list of people to pray for pinned above his bed. As he hopped into bed late one night he called out wearily, 'Same as usual for a Monday night, Lord!'

Amusing though this anecdote is, it highlights a genuine problem. By nature, burden-bearers are supremely concerned to succour the needy. As John and Paula Sandford explain, burden-bearers will be down on their knees praying for a deeper work of grace among God's people at the time when others are off to enjoy themselves at parties.⁵ For he, or more likely she, (for women tend to

be more instinctive burden-bearers than men), has already sensed the hindrances that are not so readily discernible. Conversely, when the church begins to feel challenged, and to mourn its sinfulness and lack of power, there will be joy in the burden-bearer's heart.⁶

This ability to empathize is such an important key to effective intercession that the devil tries to distort the gift. By making us identify too deeply with some distressing situations, we are in danger of ending up almost as despondent as the people we are praying for. As so often in the spiritual life, our greatest strengths can easily become our greatest weaknesses.

This, I believe, is one of the reasons why many of us subconsciously prefer to limit our involvement to matters close to home and heart. The mere thought of certain types of suffering may be enough to induce in some people a degree of spiritual paralysis. The Lord Jesus warned us that *because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold* (Matthew 24:12). We must not allow difficulties to rob both God and people all around the world of the good we could be doing on their behalf through prayer.

If we are to associate ourselves with those who are suffering, it is crucial that we know with all our hearts that Jesus is Lord, that heaven is stronger than hell, and that praise lifts us into the dimension which God inhabits. Otherwise we will merely worry. Were we to open our hearts to every need we hear about, we would be crushed by the weight of sin and sorrow. It is inevitable that we set up barriers and filters across the entrance to our mind in order to protect ourselves. The risk is that we go too far, effectively 'privatizing' our faith. Our subconscious springs to its own defence, and we end up praying little more than a grown-up's version of 'God bless Mummy and Daddy, and keep us all well-fed and well-paid.'⁷

It grieves me greatly that most churches pay so little attention to prayer in their Sunday services. How can it be right to leave it all to the relative handful who attend the midweek prayer meeting? The more the Lord teaches us about the power that can be released into world situations through prayer, the more we realise that we are not so powerless after all. God has given His intercessors authority in prayer, so that whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matthew 18:18). We must find ways to harness this gift of prayer and to give it its rightful place in the life of the Church.

Handling the Calling

The world scoffs at the thought of a man weeping for his neighbour's sins as if for his own, or even more than for his own, for it seems contrary to nature. But the love which brings it about is not of this world.

(Angela of Foligno)⁸

I asked the Lord once to show me more about what it meant to be a burden-bearer. By way of a reply, He showed me in the spirit a picture of an eastern lady. She was walking along, carrying a pitcher on her head without apparent effort. When I tried to do the same it proved much harder than I had expected. The pitcher slipped from my head to my shoulders with the result that I was staggering along, bent almost double under its weight. The Lord revealed that the secret of carrying burdens lies in 'poise, posture and practice'.

The Lord wants us to be able to carry heavier burdens for longer periods of time without becoming excessively drained in the process. There is much to ponder here. As burdenbearers, we will often find ourselves identifying with the pain and struggles that others are going through. *'Who is weak and I do not feel weak?'* asked Paul. *'Who is led into sin and I do not inwardly burn?'* (2 Corinthians 11:29).

Shortly after we were married, Rosalind and I experienced a day when we became extremely tense and irritated with each other. It crossed my mind that the Lord might be using this to highlight the intense warfare that is being waged against Christian marriages. Minutes later, I heard that a man in our congregation had left his wife in a storm of violence. (Mercifully the separation was only temporary).

I wish I could say that we only get uptight with each other when we are identifying with other people's problems! Nevertheless, there is an authentic aspect to such identification which we do well to be aware of. We may, for example, sometimes experience in our own bodies some of the symptoms of a sick person we are praying for. It is surely far more useful to cry out to the Lord when we are feeling sick or weighed down than just to soldier on. At the very least it transforms our apparently negative emotions into powerful intercession.

With experience, we learn to recognize when we are feeling deflated, and hence less able to bear burdens. These times often follow hard on the heels of particular blessings.

Another risk that burden-bearers run is that we begin to derive our sense of self-worth from what we do on behalf of other people. In extreme cases, we can become so taken up with the needs of others that we lose any real confidence that the Lord loves us for our own sake at all. So deeply ingrained is this need to be strong for the sake of others that we risk repressing our own feelings, until the day comes when they burst out like a pent-up volcano.

When our inner being is cluttered and confused by all the needs and hurts around us, however, it is all too easy to develop manipulative ways to protect ourselves, and to control the environment around us. I have seen men driven by powerful insecurities imposing a tyranny of rigid rules and regulations on their families – rather like Captain von Trapp in 'The Sound of Music' whistling his orders to his young family. Much of the poignancy of this story lies in the way his future wife pierced his defences and brought down the walls that he had built up to protect himself.

All such control mechanisms must be seen for what they are: a sinful intrusion on the freedom of others. If staying open and remaining flexible is costly, the alternative is worse. The walls that we build to protect ourselves have a way of keeping out many of God's choicest blessings – including the people who really could have helped us. We are unwise if we become too selective in who we will see, and when. Who are we to say what is really best for us?

It is much the same in the life of the Church. It is not as easy as it sounds to allow the Lord Jesus to be the unconditional Head of His Church. Many leaders regulate and surround activities with all manner of restrictions in order to keep them 'safe'. In the process, many devout and free spirits are trampled on. Some never recover.

Intercession is not magic. God does not take away our free will, and neither must we in our

prayers for each other. We cannot take a burden completely off people who are unwilling for it to be taken from them. Scripture is quite clear that *each one should carry his own load* (Galatians 6:5). What the Lord may give us is the authority to ‘lift’ the weight of whatever has been causing the problem to the point where a person is free to decide for him or herself how it is that they want to live.

The intercessor is used, therefore, to ‘narrow the gap’ between the way things are and the way God wants them to be. You see something wrong? Then pray about it! You see someone in need? Then pray for them! You will find that you have entered into the ministry of heaven itself, and you will experience much sweet fellowship with our Risen Saviour, who is even now interceding for His children.

For Reflection

There are some favours that the Almighty does not grant either the first, or the second, or the third time you ask Him, because He wishes you to pray for a long time. Often, He wills this delay to keep you in a state of humility.

(Jean Eudes)⁸

Do you live and work in the fast lane? Then take time to pray for those who are in the Lord’s slow lane: prisoners, (both criminal and religious); the bereaved; the seriously ill; the spiritually isolated – especially those who struggle to survive as Christians in hostile countries.

Have you been slowed down and wonder what you are doing in the slow lane? As you look across at the fast track, it is easy to feel out of things. Try to turn these feelings round by praying for those who are in the public eye: media presenters, politicians, church and mission leaders and the such like, people doing tasks that you, for the moment at least, have no opportunity to do. The one who knows how to bear burdens in prayer need never feel excluded!

Selah

Lord, I want to take this call to prayer seriously. Fill me anew with the Holy Spirit of prayer. Keep my heart free from unnecessary preoccupations so that I can share more fully in this holy work of lifting others before Your throne. Prompt me to pray for the particular people, places and situations that You bring to my attention. Remind me, too, of all those burdens You have given me in the past, and which I have so often neglected. Thank You that you want to give me joy in the house of prayer! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

References

1.
1 Corinthians 5:4.
2.
Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Saints* Jill Haak Adels. (O.U.P.).
- 3.

We often come under attack in the precise areas we have been praying about. It is also worth being aware that there are satanic covens who meet regularly to call down curses on pastors and their families, and on Christian enterprise in general. This is not to be underestimated. For those who feel they may be afflicted in such ways, I would recommend Francis Frangipane’s book *The Divine Antidote*, together with specific prayer and fasting.

4.

Gordon MacDonald, *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* (Highland).

5.

Ecclesiastes 7:2-3.

6.

John and Paula Sandford, *The Elijah Task* (Logos International). We can continue to 'burden-bear' even when we are in the midst of other pursuits. The gift of tongues is a wonderful asset in this respect. It is obviously better, though, to find a place where you can devote your whole attention to the matter you feel called to pray about.

7.

There are no simple answers to this dilemma. Richard Foster's book *The Freedom of Simplicity* (S.P.C.K. Triangle) is a modern masterpiece on the inner life, as well as a serious examination of how we should be living in the light of gross global inequalities.

8.

Quoted in *The Wisdom of the Saints* Jill Haak Adels (O.U.P.).

Chapter Fourteen

The Whispers of His Love

I am the Lord your God who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.
(Isaiah 48:17)

AS I LOOK ACROSS THE ROOM AT MY RADIO, I know that I can tune in any time I like to the world's news and views. But when we seek the Lord in prayer, do we expect to be able to hear Him so clearly? The answer is surely 'No!' – but God would not have told the Israelites to listen carefully to the voice of the Lord (Exodus 15:26) had it not been possible for them to do so. On the Mount of Transfiguration, when the voice came from the majestic glory, the Lord commanded His disciples to *listen* to Him.

The most casual reading of Scripture reveals how dependent the great men of God were on being able to hear the voice of the Lord. The Lord spoke to Moses, for example, 'face to face', as a man speaks with his friend,¹ and we wish we found it so simple. Yet since I have not hesitated to state throughout this book 'the Lord said this or that', it is important for us to explore the implications of this overused, often abused, but ultimately undervalued expression.

In ordinary life, we hear people in more ways than just through their words. 'Hearing' is the end process of knowing the person with whom we are communicating. We 'hear' the Lord because we know Him. A close friend of mine once attended a gathering of the underground church in a Russian barn. It would have been too dangerous to have given out a public notice, but the Lord brought everyone together on time and in place. My friend was even more humbled when they asked him to teach them how to hear the voice of the Lord!

For Christians who live under persecution, listening is an integral part of their everyday lives. Even without the stimulus of persecution, we should be careful not to forge ahead with our own

plans without consulting Him first. Why should He rubber-stamp our actions? Scripture tells us that we are to draw near to the house of God in order to listen.² It does not define any specific mechanism or process: it speaks rather of the constant practice that is needed to be able to discern the right or the wrong way.³

Imagine a Resistance radio operator in the Second World War going into a hut in the Norwegian mountains to contact Allied Command. On some days the radio reception is crystal clear, and messages can be both transmitted and received. On other occasions, reception is weak, and little or nothing can be made out. It is not so different in the spiritual realm. Our ability to discern the Lord's voice varies greatly from day to day. Not only can the 'wavelengths' of our mind get clogged with our own concerns, but we are easily distracted by the welter of signals a clamouring world sends our way. Moreover, demonic forces strive to 'jam' our communication. Far better than we, they know the damage that is done to their kingdom when people follow the Lord's leading.

We should never underestimate the help that even the briefest word from the Lord can bring. One day, when the disciples were ministering to the Lord, the Holy Spirit said to them: '*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*' (Acts 13:2).⁴ This was the prophetic word that commissioned the apostle Paul for his great work of church planting. Many of the finest New Testament churches – and ultimately our own today – came into being because the disciples responded to that word.

How grateful we can be that Moses and the other prophets wrote down what the Lord had said to them!⁵ Understanding some of the ways in which God spoke to them can help to increase our confidence that the Lord will enable us too to discern His leading more clearly.

Dare to Listen!

When some horrible surprise overtakes us, common sense may or may not lead us to do the right thing. The danger is that fear and tension can easily shut out the voice of the living God. It is those who have learnt to still their souls who are most likely to be able to find God's way forward. In corporate terms, we expect young recruits to a company to be taught to heed the word of the boss. Why are we so diffident then about teaching young Christians to listen to their Lord? Despite our manifest ability to get it wrong and mishear, the Lord honours our desire to learn more about listening.

Given the bewildering variety of alternatives we often face, we need to seek the Lord! Not only are there many calls on our time, but the different facets of our character all impose their own demands. Some of these should be honoured, and others ignored. Thus the part of us which would enjoy a quiet evening at home watching a good film may find itself in direct conflict with the awareness that we have not spent much time recently with the Lord. Meanwhile, another part of us may be chafing over a pile of unfinished business – or ironing – even while a social - reminder is bleeping in our brain that we are long overdue to visit friends or family. Only the Lord can show us how to spend each day most effectively!

Paradoxically, it can be almost as hard to trust that we have heard the Lord saying the very thing we most wanted to hear, as it is to face something unpalatable. We are afraid we are imagining the

words of blessing and promise, just as we tend to reject warnings or rebuke.

Children sometimes hear the Lord more easily than we do. The Lord found a wonderfully discreet way to alert our daughter, Ruth, when we were about to move from Chester. Running downstairs one day she called out, 'Something really important has happened: I've seen an angel! He told me I'm going to need to make new friends for my birthday party.' Sure enough, we did move – and in time to make new friends for her fifth birthday party.

Calls become weightier as the years go by. When she was nearly nine, the opportunity arose for Ruth to attend a Christian school in Worcester. Because of the distance, this meant living with another family from Monday to Friday. The Lord arranged the details miraculously. We met a couple who were keen to host a child who wanted to attend the school but who could not manage the distance on a daily basis. Nevertheless, it was a costly decision for all of us to have her living away from home. The Lord reassured Ruth that it was His will, and promised that He would dry her eyes. When she reached up to brush away the tears that came as He gave her this word, she found that her eyes were already dry! Ruth benefited greatly from attending a school that was, in many ways, more like a Bible college.

Two years later He implanted a deep desire in her to go to Africa. Out of the blue, she was approached by a missionary organization who invited her to join their team on a mission to southern Tanzania. She had the time of her life, gained invaluable ministry experience and fell in love with the African people and the Swahili language. Who knows where He will lead any of us next?

Confirming a Word from the Lord

Which of us has not struggled to discern whether some word or vision truly is of God? Bob Mumford counsels that when God is about to lead us on to some major new path, He will normally confirm His word to us in a number of different ways.⁶ When it comes to making life-changing decisions, we should be wary of proceeding on the basis of only one or two strands of guidance.

In other words, we need not only an initial inner witness but also an ongoing sense of rightness about some course of action. Confirmation will come from God's Word, through the wisdom of those who are over us in the Lord and by the opening or shutting of the particular door in question. Only when at least three of these strands of guidance are in place – the witness of the Spirit, confirmation from the Word, and through other Christians, as well as the specific opening or shutting of doors – is it safe to conclude that some impulse or thought represents the authentic leading of the Lord.

Since most of us rely heavily on circumstances to be the final arbiter in matters of guidance I have deliberately left it to last. When Paul arrived in Troas he found a wide open door for his ministry.⁷ A lesser man might have concluded that this was meant to be his life's work, but Paul knew that he had received a prior calling to work with Titus. Because his friend was not there, he walked away from this open door and moved on to Macedonia.

A simple guideline for helping us to tell the difference between flesh and Spirit (and between

God and Satan) is that the Lord speaks to our spirit, not just to our mind. When the Lord has spoken, we are left with a deep assurance, even though we may not understand all the implications of what He has said. When we listen to our own feelings and inclinations we are usually left with uncertainty and confusion.

By trial and error we learn to discern between the many conflicting impulses that come our way. Most commonly, the 'voices' that echo in our minds are nothing but the distorted projections of our own unresolved emotional conflicts. This counterfeit of true listening may be no more than hearing what our old nature wants to hear.

The 'child' voice within us clamours for attention and approval. This immature voice promises all manner of great things, but it has no substance behind it, and no willingness to embrace the Cross. It wants all sorts of good things – and preferably right now! It is so deceptive that, in the privacy of our hearts, it may try to reassure us that the sins of the flesh are perfectly acceptable in the sight of a loving God. Since it welcomes neither inspection nor testing, its delusory promises lead at best to disillusionment, at worst to serious trouble.

Still more of us are driven by a 'parent' voice, which imposes stern demands. Often posing as the voice of God (and speaking through our distorted conscience) it owes more to our misguided idea of what religion ought to be than to the true freedom of the Holy Spirit. Some still labour under the misguided impression that the hard way must always be the right way.⁸

Rigid legalism is the result of following this voice. Its baleful influence has spread much bondage throughout the Church. It is the spirit that lies behind the cults: it kills joy, and concentrates power in the hands of people with controlling tendencies. This spirit quickly degenerates into a particularly horrible form of abuse, made none the better by appearing to be so determinedly 'righteous'. It is most likely to afflict people who are not truly humble, and who are trying to compensate for inner inadequacies. It is often to be found in those who were used by the Lord in the past, but who are now unable to perceive when He is doing something new, and who have effectively become opponents of the Holy Spirit.

This matter of control is a serious one. The secret formula that satanists are taught at the highest level of their initiation is, 'Let my will be done in everything.' This is the direct opposite of all that true Christianity stands for. The voice of control is ultimately the way of self and Satan.

Intimacy with God sets us free from making unfair demands on each other. The Lord sometimes has to go to considerable lengths to rescue those who have been cruelly dominated. However unwittingly, many church leaders have often been guilty of crushing others by their strong personalities, harsh words and rigid ways of doing things. Our constant prayer must be to be able to steer people closer to their Lord, rather than making them dependent on ourselves.

For Reflection

As you have sought to listen to the Lord recently, what themes has He been stressing? To what extent are you obeying and acting on what He has shown you?

Selah

Lord, the words You speak to me make all the difference! Help me to be quick to recognize when You are speaking, and prompt to obey. Open my ears to the whispers of Your love, and help me to believe and act on what You show me, no matter how unlikely it may sound. Keep me from chasing shadows and illusions, but help me to face the hard things that You show me, so that I may inherit all that You have promised. In Jesus' name, Amen.

References

1.

Exodus 33:11.

2.

Ecclesiastes 5:1.

3.

Hebrews 5:14.

4.

This word was given to the disciples at Antioch, where the Lord had brought together a multi-national team of prophets, pastors and evangelists. The church in Antioch became a major resource for the whole of the region. When the different parts of the Body are functioning in harmony, it is much easier for the Lord to build his Church.

5.

Exodus 24:4; Jeremiah 30:2; 36:2-4; Habakkuk 2:2;

Revelation 1:11.

6.

Bob Mumford, *Take Another Look at Guidance* (Logos). Bob has also written an excellent book on Temptation.

7.

2 Corinthians 2:12-13.

8.

Alissa in Andre Gide's *La Porte Etroite* is a good example of this.

Chapter Fifteen

The Paths of Guidance

For this God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our guide even to the end.

(Psalm 48:14)

THE WALK WE HAD BEEN FOLLOWING was new to us. There were few signposts, and we often needed to stop and check our bearings. Now, on the Broad Open Spaces, we were able to catch our breath and look back on the varied route we had travelled.

Sailing ships advance against the wind by tacking. Effectively this means they often do not appear to be making much headway towards their destination. If we understood this principle better, we would perhaps worry less about the detours we experience on our pilgrimage. The Lord knows not only what is best for us, but also how to help us find the path that will lead us there.

It is awesome to look back over twenty years of ministry and see how accurately the Lord has led at each stage of our journey. Early in my Christian life I applied to spend a year teaching English in a French school. I indicated my regional preferences on the form, adding the proviso: 'Anywhere except the Paris region.' There is nothing more exciting than seeing the Power-that-is-eternal overruling the powers that be! Man makes his plans, but when God has something better in mind, He does not hesitate to overrule them completely. In the providence of God I was posted to a town just outside the capital city!

My predecessor warned me dourly that the accommodation was dingy, and the school horrible; why not cut my losses and cancel now while I still had time? (He himself had left early.) We will often experience such discouragement before entering into something of great spiritual value. During the last hour or two of my journey there I had an almost overwhelming sense of being held in the love of God. The sweetness of that time was an intimation of all the Lord had in store for me during that memorable year. There turned out to be nothing wrong with the accommodation, either; it became a treasured sanctuary where I was able to spend extended times of prayer and Bible study.

The way in which the Lord led me to the church that was to be my training-school was another example of heaven taking the initiative and overruling my plans. One day I decided to attend a day conference in Paris and set my alarm clock accordingly. For the first and only time in its honourable life, my trusted alarm failed to go off. One glance showed me that it was too late to set out. What should I do with the rest of the day?

Before leaving England someone had given me the address of a retired vicar in Paris. I decided to pay him a visit, supposing he might be lonely. You can imagine my surprise when I reached the address and discovered that, so far from being retired, he was leading a church that served the English-speaking community in Paris!

On such spectacularly inaccurate information hung much blessing. St Michael's was a church in which ex-pats, au pairs, odd-bods, diplomats and teachers rubbed shoulders with each other, the chief common denominator being a reasonable grasp of the English tongue. There, in a warm and welcoming atmosphere, far from the familiar, if often soul-deadening, comforts of home, many people came to a living faith.

I can never speak too highly of the nurture I received from the pastor, Eric McLellan. Blessed are they who draw out people's potential without being put off by their obvious immaturity! Eric played a pivotal role in my spiritual development by giving me opportunities to lead people to the Lord and to preach. In the light of all that subsequently happened, I often marvel how much I would have missed had my alarm clock worked as it should have done that morning. The Lord had taken the initiative and overruled my plans according to His far greater wisdom.

It was on a return trip to this English-speaking fellowship in Paris in 1978 that I received a nudge with far-reaching consequences. I had been invited to share at the evening fellowship meeting, at which I was greatly struck by the anointing on two musicians: an exceptionally talented young songwriter called Linda, and an oboist. The following day, which was to be my

last in Paris, the Lord directed me to make a long trek across town to visit this oboist. When I finally got there, she was out!

You will no doubt be as familiar as I am with that sinking feeling that you must have got it all wrong. It is bad enough to waste a day, but it is even worse when you thought you were following the Lord's leading. I left a scribbled note under her door to the effect that it had been good to meet her the day before, and that if she were ever back in England, she would be most welcome to get in contact. That, so far as I was concerned, was the unsatisfactory ending to an otherwise unusually blessed trip.

Three years later I heard again from the oboist. She was back in England now and serving on the committee of the Musicians' Christian Fellowship. They had been praying about who to invite as the speaker for their annual conference, and the Lord impressed on her that I was to be the one. (Mercifully she had stored my address away.) I was thrilled to receive the invitation, but was obliged to decline it as I had a prior engagement.

When the Lord has a purpose in mind, He is prepared to move heaven and earth to fulfil it. I received a letter the following day informing me that I was no longer needed for the mission I had been planning to attend. I was free to go and be with the musicians. It was there that I met up again with Linda – and, along with a number of outstanding musicians, we have been working together ever since. Only eternity will reveal the full significance of that nudge to visit someone who was out. Jesus is the Door, and He loves to open other doors for His servants.

There had been talk that I might return to serve in the church in Paris when I had finished my course at university. Although nothing was formally decided, I rather set my hopes on the post. Months went past and I heard nothing. I discovered later that the job had been offered to someone else. I remember crying out to the Lord that He would turn this disappointment into His appointment. And He did. As final examinations loomed, the Lord told me not to go looking for jobs because He was going to give me one directly.

This sounds easy to record on paper, but it was, as you can imagine, a strange feeling to shun the Careers Office at a time when all my colleagues were busying themselves with interviews. Unusual guidance requires rigorous testing. It is only too easy to stray beyond faith into presumption. (I have done so myself on other occasions and come a cropper as a result.) Since I was faced with a total absence of any alternative leading, however, I yielded to what I sincerely hoped to be God's plan for me, and made no effort to look for a job.

This, my first real experience of waiting, was not made any easier by having little idea what it was I was supposed to be waiting for. (There again, did the disciples really understand what they were waiting for when they prayed together in the Upper Room for the Holy Spirit to be sent upon them?) Faith was finally rewarded a few weeks before my final exams, when the rector of the church I was attending in Oxford offered me the post of lay evangelist for the parish. Through this unexpected invitation, I was able to pass directly from university into full-time ministry.

Knowing all that was to come, the Lord closed the path back to Paris. This experience was a steep Ascent of Toil – but it opened up into a long-term Broad Open Space.

The opportunity arose to move into a spacious flat in Oxford that was owned by the church. Life in a small community was, for the most part blissfully happy. It was a time for living life to the full, cutting teeth in ministry situations, and helping people in ways that I could never have done on my own, or even in a nuclear family for that matter.

Three exciting years of pastoral and evangelistic ministry later, the Lord redirected my path. He told me to resign my job in six months' time, but did not initially tell me where I should be going. The field was wide open for outrageous suggestions! The six months were almost up before the sequel began to unfold. It began with a dream of black and white houses. For some reason, I felt convinced that the place referred to was Chester, a city I knew nothing about.

As I waited on the Lord for more detail, He showed me from Deuteronomy chapter 18 that I was a 'Levite': one who was set apart to minister to Him. This was all very encouraging, but how did God care for the Levites? By causing the people of God to share with them the material benefits that they themselves had received from the Lord. So long as the people of God were fruitful and faithful, the Levites prospered. In times of recession, however, they suffered. Clearly, He was calling me to live without a regular income – something I had always hoped He would never ask me to do!

I told the Lord I was willing to go, but asked for more guidance. A few nights later as I was going to bed, the Lord whispered the names of two Anglican churches into my ear. On the strength of this word, I paid Chester a flying visit. Feeling more than a trifle foolish, I asked a newsagent whether she had heard of these two churches. To my amazement, they turned out not only to exist but to be neighbouring parishes!

Truly, we serve a God who guides His children wonderfully. I have rather trembled to share so much autobiography in one chapter, in case people suppose that such things happen to us every day, or that they should be experiencing similarly dramatic guidance. I would emphatically not counsel anyone to sit back in the way that I did and wait for a job to turn up, unless the Lord makes it abundantly clear that this is the path that He would have them follow. His leadings are as infinite as His variety in creation. The important thing is that He is completely committed to guiding His children who put their trust in Him.

By moving me to Chester, the Lord was calling me to embrace a radically different lifestyle. From merely being aware that contemplation existed, the Lord was now giving me a specific call to it. It marked the beginning of an entirely new phase in my life.

Dreams and Visions

As we have seen, it was through a dream that the Lord first directed me to Chester. Dreams and visions are two of the ways the Lord sometimes uses to impart guidance. When Aaron and his sister Miriam grumbled against Moses in the wilderness, their rebellious attitude provoked this word of correction from the Lord:

*When a prophet of the Lord is among you,
I reveal Myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.*

*But this is not true of My servant Moses;
He is faithful in all My house.
With him I speak face to face,
Clearly and not in riddles;
He sees the form of the Lord.*
(Numbers 12:6-8)

Implied in this passage is the existence of a sort of hierarchy of communication. At the top are 'face to face' encounters between God and His children. After that come dreams and visions, which the Lord uses to show us things we could not otherwise have known. I have discussed the significance of riddles at some length in the chapter 'The Dark Speech of God' in *Ravens and the Prophet*.¹

We have been hearing many exciting reports recently of the Lord revealing Himself through dreams to Muslims in countries where it is impossible to preach the Gospel openly.² In a village in Algeria where the martyr Ramon Lull once preached, the Lord sent so mighty a visitation that every single man in it was converted. There have been other recorded instances of imams (religious teachers) being converted, and subsequently holding church services in their mosques. This is something to remember actively in prayer. The Church in North Africa and the Middle East needs all the support we can give it.

The dreams God sends are intended to comfort and instruct us but they are in no way deterministic. In other words, what we see in a dream is not inevitably bound to happen in real life – though it may serve to warn us of what might happen if we do not pray to avert the danger we have glimpsed.

As with other forms of guidance, what God reveals to us is usually partial, and needs further clarification. Dreams serve to stimulate our minds to explore a subject prayerfully, but it is comparatively rare that God tells us what to do through them. In my experience, I often dream about friends in unusual contexts, or people with whom I have lost contact. Most of the details may be irrelevant, but the dream has served its purpose in reminding me of someone I am meant to pray for or to get in touch with.

The principle is that God gives fresh guidance as and when we need it. We are brought so far along a path, and then we have to stop and ask again. This keeps us humble and dependent. The Lord warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt. This piece of guidance saved the Lord Jesus' life, but it cost Joseph his livelihood and reduced his family to refugee status.

Some time later, Joseph was shown in another dream that Herod was dead. The family set out accordingly, only to come to an abrupt halt on hearing the disturbing news that Herod's tyrannical son was now reigning in Judea. It was at this point of uncertainty that God revealed the next stage of His plan, warning them in yet another dream not to return to Judea, but to head north instead to Galilee.³

Most of our dreams, of course, are just the normal random processes of the subconscious mind, and we must beware of trying too hard to find an interpretation where none is immediately

forthcoming. Dreams that God has sent either come back to us during the course of the day, or are so firmly etched in our minds the moment we awake that we know them to be of a deeper significance. We are wise if we write down the details quickly, before they begin to fade. C.S. Lewis records that he 'saw' the substance of his Narnia books in a series of dreams before he put pen to paper.

More commonly, God uses dreams as a 'progress report' on our spiritual condition. Because they are just between ourselves and God, they are the most discreet way He has of alerting us to something that is out of balance in our life. Dreams in which certain situations continually recur may be particularly significant. These revelations about our inner selves are often the jolt we need to take something seriously.

If dreams can be significant, it is even more important that we heed visions, for God is addressing our conscious mind here as well as our subconscious. In a vision we are shown something in picture form that throws spiritual light on a situation. There are many examples in the Bible of the Lord using visions to guide and instruct His people.⁴ God still sends warnings to churches and to nations through prophetic visions. He wants us to be His watchmen and to pray as fervently for our nation as we do for our loved ones.

It was through a vision the Lord led Ananias to the house where Saul was staying. Since Saul of Tarsus was known to the disciples only as a red-hot opponent of the Church it was an improbable and dangerous command. Ananias' willingness to make himself vulnerable was a crucial step in transforming Saul into the great apostle Paul.⁷ Think of all that would not have happened had Daniel and Ananias not obeyed their improbable leadings! It makes us eager to imitate their obedience, whilst maintaining sensible safeguards.

The series of visions the Lord gave Micah concerning the state of Samaria and Jerusalem formed the substance of his prophetic message.⁵ God likewise gave Daniel the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in a vision, an act of grace which not only saved his life but which prepared the way for his meteoric rise to power in the Babylonian court.⁶

More often than not, however, we are speaking of simple fleeting impressions that pass across the screen of our minds and which help us to pray or to counsel more effectively. If we are open to the Lord, He may well speak to us from time to time in dreams and visions.

Interpreting God's Time-Scale

Solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil — Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity.
(Hebrews 5:14; 6:1)

The present move of the Spirit has empowered many Christians; now the Lord is urging us to press on to maturity. The verb *phero* (translated *to go on* in Hebrews 6:1) means to be borne along, like a ship driven by the wind. The King James Version speaks of *having our senses exercised*. This is a translation of the word *aistheteria*, which refers to the organs of sense, such as our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, fingers and the nervous system. Clearly, there is something in the soul that corresponds to these senses and which we need to build up. The word 'exercised' (*gymnazo*)

means to train (stripped of clothes). This use of imagery from the world of athletics reminds us that considerable effort is required in order to reach spiritual maturity.

Most of us find few things harder to interpret than God's time-scale. The Lord often works fast, but He is rarely in a rush. Paul had to remind the Thessalonians that although Jesus would be returning soon, they still needed to work and earn their daily bread.⁸ Our confusion often stems from mistaking some initial calling for the commission itself. The initial call is given to alert us to begin to make preparations. We may not need to take any decisive action until the confirmation comes that releases us into action. Understanding this will save us from rushing into premature and irresponsible actions,⁹ and will encourage us to double-check sudden impulses.

I mention this with some diffidence, because we have known occasions when an unexpected curtailment of our plans has proved to be the Lord's leading. While we were on honeymoon, the Lord told us to cut our holiday short, and to return home three days early. We found a letter waiting for us, inviting Rosalind for an interview on the following day. Not only was she offered the job – she was the last midwife from outside the county to be appointed for nearly a decade! In the light of the way the Lord has developed her midwifery ministry, we can only marvel at the care He took to bring us back in time for that all-important interview.

Because there may be a significant time delay between an initial call and our subsequent commission, there is a danger that we may try to fulfil the vision by our own efforts. The troubles multiply when we try to force the outcome prematurely. Like Abraham, we can make an 'Ishmael' out of a genuine promise of God. It is not always wise to get the oars out when the wind is not filling our sails!

True spirituality is neither outlandish nor impulsive, but acts with mature deliberation on what the Lord has revealed. I sometimes wonder, though, whether too many of us in the Church today are not so heavily influenced by the cautious dictates of worldly wisdom that we are no longer willing to risk following the still small voice of God's leading. As Peter Marshall put it: God save us from the hot heads who would lead us foolishly, and from cold feet which would keep us from adventuring at all!

We must do our best to test everything. Thus it was not enough that I felt the Lord telling me to go to Chester; the mind, after all, can imagine anything. It wasn't even enough that I had found the churches the Lord had told me about through a word of knowledge. The clinching factor came when I met to pray with the leaders of the church in Chester about the possibility of my coming to be with them. The vicar was given a clear conviction that our lives had been proceeding as if they were along parallel lines, and that the Lord now wanted to bring our paths together. Within a few months I was based at the one church, and leading a prayer group in the other. God had spoken through a dream and a word of knowledge, to lead me to a town with which I would otherwise have had no connection. The Lord was my Provider and my Shepherd during those early days in Chester. I felt, in many ways, as though I was being 'fed by ravens'. I had then, as I have now, no guaranteed income, but the Lord provided, first a city-centre flat overlooking the river, then a car, and finally, three years later, a house. He is generous beyond our wildest imaginings – and He wants His children to trust Him.

In recent years we have faced a number of serious setbacks and disappointments and experienced the inevitable temptation to wallow in the pain and confusion. We have discerned a pattern emerging, however, of the Lord wonderfully making up to us over a period of time for the things we had lost in the short term. The Lord is faithful, and wishes to reassure all who put their trust in Him that the Broad Open Spaces do indeed await us. He has indeed 'saved the best till last' (cf John 2:10).

On the Broad Open Spaces, just as much as on the Ascent of Toil, we must keep our gaze firmly fixed on the Lord who has gone ahead to prepare the way for us. He wants us to have confidence to follow His leadings, and to discern His whispers to us. But how are we to handle the many times when we are unable to discern the Lord's will? The simple answer is that we must trust Him in the darkness and learn from our mistakes! We should no more stop trying to listen to the Lord because we have misunderstood His will in the past than refuse to get back into a car because we have had an accident.

There is another aspect to this. We must also face the fact that God sometimes appears to allow those who are seemingly very mature to trip over their feet from time to time in some matter of listening, if only to keep them from taking undue pride in their own abilities and achievements. Many of our mistakes stem from failing to share our situation in sufficient detail with praying friends. However, not everyone will agree with us even when we have heard correctly. The way of the cross sometimes sets us on a course that others – even those who love us dearly – will find hard to understand. Their outlook on life makes it virtually impossible for them to see things as we do.

Feeling something for oneself, but hearing the opposite from one's friends can be extremely confusing. Often it is best to wait until things become clearer to all concerned. Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted, and most matters of guidance benefit from proper prayer and consultation. But there are occasions when we face a unique opportunity and have to decide more or less there and then what to do about it. With great humility we must accept that if the Lord really is calling us forward, we cannot afford to keep looking over our shoulder to see who is following us! But do remember that when a major issue of guidance is involved, the Lord will confirm His calling to us by more than one strand of leading.

For Reflection

Most of us find guidance a complex issue – but that does not mean the Lord is not leading us. It is worth making the effort to record the Lord's dealings with us. Take time to ponder and discern His leading in your life, and to praise Him for his faithfulness to you.

Selah

Father, I praise You that You are guiding me. I plan my ways, but it is You who ordain the steps of my life. Thank You for bringing all the people who mean so much to me into my life. Give me eyes to recognize when You are calling me to some new venture, or leading me in a particular direction – and grant me the willingness to respond accordingly. In Jesus' name. Amen.

References

1.

Robert Weston, *Ravens and the Prophet* (New Wine Press).

2.

cf Genesis 28:11-15; 1 Kings 3:5-15. See, for example, Bilquis Sheikh's book, *I dared to call Him Father* (Hodder and Stoughton).

3.

Matthew 2:19-23. The wise men were likewise instructed in a dream not to return to King Herod (Matthew 2:12). See also Matthew 1:20; Genesis 31:24.

4.

E.g. Genesis 15:1ff; Acts 2:17; 2 Corinthians 12:1.

5.

Micah 1:1.

6.

Daniel 2:19 ff.

7.

Acts 9:10-18.

8.

2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.

9.

When the Lord calls us to do something unconventional, it often happens that an easier course of action comes our way at about the same time. Such temptations are a test of our willingness to pay the cost to see the original vision through.

Chapter Sixteen

Towards Eternity

God is the greatest lover of all. Being chosen for a direct experience of this overwhelming love can be intoxicating. Teresa of Avila once wrote that she had been 'going around as if drunk' . . .

'Mystic Union' is a foretaste of what the blessed souls in Heaven are experiencing. It is the union of the soul with God in deep contemplation, marked by a profound awareness of the divine presence. It is a supernatural state, wrought by the action of God, and no amount of human striving can produce it. There is a temporary transportation to the supernatural life as the result of an outpouring of unmerited grace so that human and divine meet in a union of love.

(Jill Haak Adels)¹

HOW WONDERFULLY THE LORD had met us on our Lakeland walk! We came back feeling physically and spiritually uplifted – and it has helped us in this book to explore many aspects of intimacy with God. We have considered how to enter more deeply into the life of reflection, pondered puzzling dry times and sought to overcome those crippling enemies of intimacy: condemnation and striving. We have also shown the importance of making times of silence, listening and burden-bearing a natural part of our walk with Him. Now, at the close of this book, I would like to return to the 'River of Delight' and share with you an episode from early in my Christian life. It happened in the mid 1970s when I was working near Paris. I returned home to my lodgings one evening from a midweek Bible study feeling unusually

deflated. For reasons I can no longer recall, my contributions had not been well received. I flopped down onto my knees the moment I reached my room and poured out my heart in repentance to God.

Suddenly, I found myself praying an outrageous prayer: that I might be allowed to go to heaven that night. Such a request must be mere presumption if the Holy Spirit Himself is not inspiring the prayer. It was not so much that I went to heaven as that heaven came to me. My prayer was abundantly answered, for unexpectedly, gloriously, the presence of the Lord filled my room. I became aware of the love of the Lord surrounding, accepting and knowing me in a deeper way than I had ever experienced before.

All around were the inexpressibly beautiful sounds of heavenly worship, exquisite melodies embellished with soaring harmonies of a subtlety quite beyond my ability to describe. Even though I could see no shape or form, I was overwhelmed by the certainty that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself was right there with me in the room. He told me that this time together had been accorded by the Father, and that I was free to ask Him questions.

With something of the dazed incredulity Peter must have felt on the Mount of Transfiguration I could only ask whether it was possible for Him to be appearing to people on the other side of the world at the same time as He was to me! When He said that He could, the impact of this revelation left me feeling still more awed, as all who experience the presence of the Lord in such ways have always been.

When we are wrapped in the presence of the Lord we can hear hard truths without flinching. Gently but clearly the Lord told me that He did not want me to marry the woman I was engaged to at that time. I had been sensing for several months that the relationship was not His perfect will, but for various reasons had been unwilling to face up to the consequences of doing anything about it. In the presence of the Lord of Love, I knew that my will must be to do His will. He who sees the end from the beginning knows exactly what is best for us, and He delayed marriage for me until I met Rosalind some years later.

He also mentioned that it was not His will for me to become a vicar. How strategic and wise He is. His clarity on this point helped me to fend off many well-intentioned suggestions from people who wondered why I did not 'do it properly' and get ordained.

Time sped by. It was now half past two in the morning, and I was completely caught up in the Lord's presence. We communed together for what turned out to be a further three hours – though never have hours passed so quickly or so sweetly before.

When I asked Him how I could be sure in the future that I had not imagined this face-to-face encounter, the Lord instructed me to read a passage from Deuteronomy. One verse in particular summed up what had happened to me on that momentous evening: *Today we have seen that a man can live even if God speaks with him* (Deuteronomy 5:24).

The Lord also left me with a specific gift. I had for some time been coming into contact with people who claimed to have the gift of tongues. I had begun attending a midweek gathering of

about four hundred Spirit-filled Christians. I had gone along somewhat sceptically, armed with the warnings of well-meaning friends about the emotional excesses of the charismatic movement. I realized immediately, however, that these people enjoyed a degree of intimacy in their worship that far surpassed my own experience. I longed to know the Lord as they did.

As a linguist, it had always intrigued me to know how a human being could speak another language without the benefit of a Linguaphone course. I was impatient to receive this gift, but the Lord was more concerned that I should benefit to the full from this precious time with Himself. When the Lord Jesus finally said that our time together must come to an end, and that I would not meet Him again in quite this way until He called me home, I felt an overwhelming grief at the thought of being separated from such perfect love. Jesus promised, however, that He would send me the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. In an outpouring of love and worship I received the gift of a heavenly language – something which has been a consistent blessing ever since.

I was utterly, joyously overawed. My workload in those far-off days was light, and this wonderful awareness of the Lord's presence continued unabated for several weeks. Heaven is not far away, it is just another dimension.

Three times over the Lord Jesus had asked me whether I was prepared to serve Him. In the presence of such perfect peace, the thought of refusing Him never entered my head. There and then the Lord called me to be His witness wherever I went. Initially, being a witness meant just that: telling people about the Lord Jesus. Already an evangelist at heart, I became for a season an officially appointed one. More recently, as the Lord has led us deeper in the ways of worship and intercession, it has come to mean observing what God is doing in the heavenly places and discerning those topics He is calling us to pray about. As I have shown throughout this book, the love of God can overwhelm us, and the power of God direct us at the most unlikely times and in the most improbable places.

The inward stirring and touching of God makes us hungry and yearning; for the Spirit of God hunts our spirit, and the more it touches it, the greater our hunger and craving. This is the life of love in its highest working, above reason and above understanding.
(Jan van Ruysbroeck)¹

My prayer for everyone who reads these words is that we may be constant in our desire to love and serve the Lord. We may not necessarily be granted spectacular experiences of eternity, because face to face encounters can only be granted by the Lord as He chooses. If we are willing to keep seeking Him, He will gladly meet our needs, and inspire others towards a life of greater intimacy with Himself that is lived in the awareness of eternity.

For Reflection

Our home is heaven. On earth, we are like travellers staying at a hotel. When one is away, one is always thinking of going home. Life is given to us that we may learn to die well, and we never think of it! To die well we must live well.
(John Vianney)¹

If an artist is proud of his handiwork, should not the Lord be even more pleased with what He is doing in the hearts of His people? Who knows – we may be the ones who will witness the return of the Lord! Certainly, we shall soon be passing on the baton to a generation who must fight harder in order to fare better than we have done. Therefore we must invest heavily in them. Our prayers span the years, and will enable many to go on receiving the Lord's blessings long after we ourselves have been called home.

It will not be long before we see Him face to face. In the meantime, it is His passionate desire to make His light shine through us. We are stars shining in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation. In the day when He makes up His treasured possession, we will sparkle like jewels in a crown. *He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.*²

Selah

Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure – And now, dear children, continue in Him, so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at His coming – And when Christ, who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. (1 John 3:3; 2:28; Colossians 3:4)

The Lord is making us beautiful, not because of anything special in us, but because His love lights up our life, even as the hills and mountains come alive when the sunlight shines on them. I would like to end by praying now for each one of you who has had the love and the stamina to make it to the last page of this book:

Lord Jesus, I bless You for what You are doing in the lives of each reader. May You expand their hearts to be able to receive more of Your love. Make them like sparks which cause dry souls to catch fire again for You. Deliver them from the temptation to hold back or to turn aside, and fill them with the joy of knowing that they belong to You for ever. May they be given grace to overcome every obstacle that they face. In Jesus' name and for the glory of His eternal Kingdom, Amen.

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2.
Philippians 2:15; 1:6; Malachi 3:17; Zechariah 9:16.