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FINDING GOD'S LOVE IN WHAT WE SUFFER

A reflection by Julian of Norwich

The Lord Jesus forgave many sinners, and we are not the least of them. But after such forgiveness he still allows some of us to fall into sin, and into sin more serious than we had committed before—at least that's how we think of the matter. Of course, we aren't wise, and as we think these thoughts we feel as if everything we have begun counts for nothing. But that isn't so. In a sense we needed to fall, and we needed to see that we were weak. If this hadn't happened, we would never have known how feeble and wretched we are when left on our own. Then we wouldn't ever have known how marvelous our Maker's love is. Only in Heaven will we see the truth, and see it without end.

Yes, we have sinned most grievously in this life, and in spite of this we will discover that God's love for us never lessened nor were we less precious in God's sight. By the testing that we see as falling we are given a high and marvelous knowledge of God's love without end. Strong and wonderful is that love which won't and can't be ended because of any trespass. How profitable it is to know this! Almost as profitable is our coming to be meek and lowly due to falling. It is by this gain that we will be raised high in heaven! We might never have risen to this height without that meekness. That is why we need to see ourselves in this way. If we don't learn to see like this, even our falling will be of no help to us. Generally, we fall first and see later but what we see is God's mercy!

A mother will sometimes let a child take a fall, or experience various discomforts, for its own good. She won't ever let the child undergo real danger because she loves it. Yet an earthly mother sometimes lets her child perish while our Heavenly Mother, Jesus, never lets that happen to us who are his children. He is almighty, all-wise and all-loving, though none of us are—May He be blessed! Now it often happens that when our falls show us how wretched and weak we are, we don't see anything to hold onto. But our kind Mother doesn't want us to run away, even though we are ashamed and very much afraid. For this Mother nothing could be more displeasing than our running away. What he wants is that we act in the way a child does.

When a child is afraid or uncomfortable it runs as fast as it can to its mother, seeking her help. A child does this with all its might! That's what Jesus wants us to do. We should act like a small, meek child who says: Gentle Mother, kind Mother, my most dear Mother, have mercy and help me! Yes, I have gotten dirty and made myself very unlike you! And I'm not able to make myself what you want, unless you give me your personal help and grace!

If you don't feel better right away, you can be sure that He is using your condition as a wise mother would. If he sees it will help us more to be sad and sorrowful and to cry then he will let this happen, but with pity and mercy, until the right time to show love comes. So, it is his will that we behave like a child and that we always kindly trust in the love of our Mother, whether things go well or woe comes.

THE POWER OF FASTING

A reflection from St. John Chrysostom's Commentary on Matthew

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. What is the significance of this deed? Remember what had just happened. Jesus had gone down into the waters of baptism and as he emerged from the water, he heard a voice: "*This is my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased!*" And then the Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted.

Keep it in mind that everything Jesus did and accepted was intended to instruct us. So, he was led into the desert to do battle with the devil for our sake. For instance, when, after we have been baptized, we are attacked by temptations that seem greater than those that preceded baptism, we mustn't let ourselves be troubled. This is not something unexpected; Jesus experienced it too, and in a way that shows us how to handle it. We must remain steadfast and bear everything with courage. We haven't received spiritual weapons so that we could relax and take it easy but so we could fight! Now think of the reasons why God doesn't prevent attacks of temptation.

In the first place, we need to learn that we are now much stronger than before. In the second place, we mustn't let ourselves get puffed up by the greatness of these spiritual gifts; we need to stay modest and temptations keep us modest. In the third place, the wicked demon may doubt at first that you have really renounced him. The fact your victorious resistance to temptation convinces him that you really have totally renounced him. In the fourth place, you need the reassurance that comes of your ability to resist with the strength of iron. In the fifth place, so you need to appreciate what a great treasure you have in God.

Temptation wouldn't come if you had been given something that is important to share, your strength in Christ. The Spirit didn't lead Jesus into a market place or a busy city but into a desert. Jesus wanted to lure the devil and so gave him an opportunity. The first one was Jesus' hunger. We renounce trying to cope with life's trials on our own by not looking to anything for help besides God. Fasting is a way of acting this out by refraining from finding relaxation and pleasure in eating and drinking; it is a symbol of our reliance on God alone.

When people renounce something that they have long depended on, it is very difficult for them to stick to this unless they have others to help them persevere. The devil likes to attack us when we are alone. He knows it is useless when we are surrounded by people who are ready to help us. That is why we need to meet for prayer so often! We help each other by praying together.

The devil didn't come near Jesus while he was fasting but only when he began to feel real hunger. Fasting is acting out dependence on God. It is, then, a very powerful way to help foil the devil to give each other the witness to fasting's power. We have been baptized and solemnly declared our renunciation of the devil and all his works. We affirm and strengthen this by fasting and encouraging one another to fast. It is even more valuable after baptism than before. We should fast now more than at any other time in our life. Remember what you are professing and strengthen one another.

THE TEACHINGS GIVEN IN CHRIST'S TEMPTATIONS

A reflection by Fr. Eugene La Verdiere

By his first temptation Jesus teaches us to reject every view that sees his divine sonship as somehow cancelling out the practical reality of his humanity. Jesus is the Son of God but is also fully human. His mission was to embrace humanity and not to escape any of the limitations that go with being human.

By his second temptation Jesus teaches us that his mission is not political. He does have a special mission as messiah, but it consists in an act of worship. That is, He shows us complete surrender to God as the only One in whom we can trust totally. If he had sought to save people by political power, he would have conducted his ministry in a quite different way. He would not have placed the total gift of self at the center of all he did and said. This gift is completed and fulfilled in his passion and death. Had he sought a salvation by political power he would have been subjecting himself to illusory Satanic power.

By his third temptation Jesus rejected the view that being a child of God entails a special human protection. Any effort to circumvent human limitations would be denying total dependence on God. That would have betrayed the Heavenly Father's intention for human life. Jesus did not expect God to save him from death. He gives his life to God.

Jesus' response to temptation shows the Christian community how it should respond to its temptations. In the context of Luke's writing, for instance, temptations have arisen in regard to sharing food in table fellowship, political relationships with the powerful, and dealing with persecution.

Christians, then, mustn't expect to be nourished just because they are Christian. All must lean to situate their needs for food, and for all the other physical needs of life, in the context of active mutual helpfulness. Christians have to bear the political difficulties that are normal for human beings and the same holds for their dealing with persecution in whatever form. We can't counter political power with political power without betraying ourselves into the hands of The Enemy or engaging in behaviors that only God can make effective.

Note too that the context in which the temptations take place is also significant. Notice that (e.g.) Luke placed them right after he declares Jesus' genealogy. This is a way of emphasizing Jesus' humanity. God has sent his messiah after Israel has been through a long history of failed efforts to save itself by human means. We have to understand Jesus in terms of this history. The genealogy shows that Adam was already a child of God but a failed one because he sought help elsewhere than in God. That was because he didn't like the indirect way God gives most help. The temptations show how a child of Adam can be a child of God without expecting God to take away human struggles.

Jesus' mission is humanity's complete victory over evil but by accepting its limitations as not an obstacle to being a child of God. Jesus accepted them completely. He shows us how God intends to triumph over evil and that God will do everything—e.g., raising Jesus from the dead—but do it through our working with Him. We accept our limitations as way of becoming one with God.

PRAYING ALWAYS

From a commentary on psalm 36 by St. Ambrose

Scripture teaches us that our hearts should constantly dwell on wisdom and that we should repeat in our hearts the lesson we learn. Let our tongues speak right judgments and let the law of our God be in our hearts. This is the right way to understand these words that follow the Great Commandment: *“You shall speak of these things when you sit in your house and when you go for a walk, when you lie down and when you get up”*.

What does the word ‘wisdom’ refer to? It refers to the Lord Jesus; he is wisdom in person; he is the Word, the very Word of God. Another text reads: *“Open your mouth and let it be filled with God’s Word”*. That means repeating Christ’s message and reflecting continually on his teachings. Christ should always be the theme of our conversation. Whenever we speak of wisdom it is Christ we speak of. When we speak of virtue, we speak of Christ, and likewise when we discuss justice or peace. When our talk is of truth and redemption and life, Christ is our topic. If we speak rightly of them, we speak of Christ.

If you are going to open your mouth and let it be filled with Christ’s words you have to open it yourself but then let God’s voice be the one which is heard. We should imitate David when he resolves, *“I will hear what the Lord says in my heart”*. We constantly repeat the invocation, “Lord, open my lips”, and when they are opened, we should let God fill them. The Spirit of wisdom is poured out upon all of us, according to the capacities God has given us. All we need is faith. If you have faith then you do possess the Spirit of wisdom and faith gives you the grace to speak it out.

As you sit in your houses, then, meditate without ceasing on the things of God and make them the subject you talk about. The word ‘house’ can mean either the church building or the secret places in our hearts where we commune with ourselves and with God. Choose your words prudently and avoid sin, and don’t talk too much! But do it not only at home but when you are in public. You never have to be idle. You don’t have to speak with others but can talk to yourself, and to God, and to Christ.

Scripture says, *“I want people to pray in every place, lifting up their hands in reverence and without anger or quarreling”*. Prayer is the best sort of speech. This is the kind of speech we should engage in when we lie down. Sleep is good but you must always be prepared for the sleep of death. This is one of the ways you can understand David’s words, *“I will not give sleep to my eyes or allow my eyelids to close until I find a place for the Lord, a place that can be a dwelling for God”*. Our natural inclination is to sleep a great deal; when the sun goes down, we go to bed. But we don’t have to sleep just because we’re in bed. David kept the Lord in mind as he lay in bed and he wanted to wake early to hear God’s voice—in our case, Christ’s voice. Don’t wait for Christ to wake you but think of him even as you fall asleep and in your dreams. Then you are asking him to wake you when death comes and on the Last Day. These are all ways in which we can fulfill God’s commands. What better time to practice this than as we prepare to celebrate Christ’s passion and death and resurrection!

WHAT ARE WE TO OFFER TO OUR GOD?

A reflection from the Treatise Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus

God regards the Church's offering as a pure and acceptable sacrifice. He has said that it is to be offered all over the world. Of course, God has no need for a sacrifice offered by us. Rather, it is an honor for those who offer it to have God accept it. We show reverence and love for the creator of all things by our gift. The Lord wishes us to offer it in all simplicity and innocence. Listen to the words of Scripture: *"If you remember when you are offering your gift at the altar that a brother or sister has some grievance against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar while you go and make peace. Then come back and offer it."* This is our duty if we want to offer a right sacrifice to our God.

We also have a duty, Scripture says, to offer God the "first fruits" of his creation. Moses noted this and warned us not to come empty-handed into the presence of the Lord, Our God. This means that we thank God by offering the very gifts that God has given us. We have nothing else to offer. So, we are honored by God for offering God's very gifts to us.

Sometimes people speak as though the offering of sacrifice had ended. This is not true. Yes, in former ages, sacrifice was offered by the People of Israel and that is no longer so. But sacrifice is still offered by the Church. Yet the nature of the offering has changed. Formerly, it was made by those who were in effect slaves, and now it is offered by free men and women. One and the same Lord, however, receives the sacrifices so we have to ask what the difference for God is between a slave's sacrifice and that of a free person. The difference is that a free person's sacrifice manifests giving oneself to God freely!

Reflect on the fact that in God's eyes there is nothing without significance and importance. Formerly, for instance, people offered tithes to God. But now that people are free, they can offer themselves. Rather than offering things people now are invited to offer all they have so it may be used in manifesting the Lord's love, as in care for the needy. In a sense, people are offering what is of lesser value because they can look forward in hope to receiving something of far greater worth. What we do reminds us of the tale of the poor widow who gave to God all she had to live on.

We are, indeed, bound to offer sacrifices to God. We should always show to God gratitude for creating us. We do this first by offering the first fruits of creation and doing it with a pure intention, a genuine faith, a firm hope, and a heartfelt love. In making such an offering we proclaim the communion and unity of all humankind in the Spirit. Earthly bread is no longer ordinary after the invocation of the Holy Spirit; it has become the eucharist. Our bodies too, after we have received the eucharist, we are no longer the same; fear of death has been replaced by sure hope for resurrection. When we offer ourselves to God what we do is offer an eternal sacrifice because we live forever. If we have become Christ then it is our task to love as God does—forever. That is a perfect sacrifice, springing from Christ's sacrifice in his death and resurrection.

REPENTANCE IS PRAYER

A reflection from a Letter by St. Maximus the Confessor

God's will is to save us. Nothing pleases God more than our coming back to him in genuine repentance. To repent is to "turn-to" God. If one prays to God intentionally then one is surrendering oneself to God; that is what we do in prayer. Prayer is a way of "turning-to" God and "turning-to" God is what prayer is. To repent and to pray are two ways of doing the same deed of trusting love.

The heralds of truth and the ministers of divine grace have told us this from the beginning, repeating it again and again. God's longing for our salvation is the primary and preeminent sign of divine goodness and love. It was precisely to show us this that the Word of God lived among us in the flesh and did and suffered all that was needed in order to reveal this truth to us.

The Lord healed our physical infirmities. He freed us from our sins. He suffered and died to take upon himself all the consequences of our wrongs. He taught us in many different ways how to imitate him, and so become like our Heavenly Father. He told us to show the same kindness and genuine love for others that set him apart as special. In all these ways he proclaimed that he had come to call sinners—for all have sinned and need to turn back to God. It was not the healthy who needed a doctor but the sick.

You have heard him declare that he came to look for lost sheep and to heal those who were sick. Using the likeness of a woman's search for a lost coin, he taught us that he came to restore the lost image of the Heavenly Father that had been imprinted in us at our creation. To make this point he told the tale of the man who fell into the hands of robbers and was left half-dead. He took him to an inn where he could be cared for and left money to pay for the care.

Meditate continuously on the words: "*You can be sure that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents*". The Lord shows us the Heavenly Father's love using the story of the son who left home to become a profligate, and only turned back when he couldn't care for himself. What will one who loves like this God do for us sinners? What could God have done for his turned-away son that he didn't do, and do gladly? What would this loving God refuse to do for us when we turn-to Him in prayer, and whatever other form of repentance we select?

Think of the story of the one hundred stay-at-home sheep and the one who got lost. When God finds us wandering and alone, he doesn't sit us down for a good talking to, nor correct us in any of the ordinary ways. God simply picks us up and brings us to safety. The deed is that of Jesus who cried out: "*Come to me all you who toil and are heavy of heart!*" He told us that if we accept his yoke, we will find that it is no great burden but something light. His is talking about the entire way of life that he gives us in the Gospels.

Once we understand how great God's love for each of us is, we understand why he asks us to become like the Heavenly Father. "*Forgive and you will be forgiven; treat other people as you would wish them to treat you*". If we only turn to God, we will begin to experience mercy and kindness and love, and in a wonderful way that we probably never imagined. That is what we do during the Lenten season. How wonderful it is to turn-to God!

BEARING THE CROSS DAILY

A reflection from a sermon by St. Augustine

Our Lenten observances always begin with a call to conversion. Indeed, those who would help and care for others in a way that leads to real life are responsible for doing this. If you want to genuinely nourish others, within as well as without, there isn't a better way than sharing with them to call to follow Christ. If we are going to let go of some of the things we rely on to make our lives pleasant, then we need spiritual strength, and we give that to one another when we repeat what we believe about God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

We are soon going to celebrate the passion of our crucified Lord. He has called us to take up our own cross daily and follow Him to Calvary. This certainly makes sense when we pause to reflect on the commitment we have made to Christ. What's more, the sort of crucifixion we have to endure is very unlikely to be harder than restraining our desires for what makes life comfortable. This is a cross we will have to take up daily if we want to become more like Christ—just as the Heavenly Father wants us to do.

Our entire life is filled with different sorts of trials, and there are temptations too. Think of the fact you are sharing crucifixion with Christ and think of this realistically. There are also the demands of justice and the call to become holy as the Heavenly Father is. What gets in the way of all this except exaggerated worry about the wants and needs of our fleshly nature? That is what St. Paul had in mind when he exhorted us to let our hands and feet be pierced by the nails that spilled Christ's blood. He was appealing to us by God's mercy to let ourselves become living sacrifices to God, holy and acceptable as only Christ can make us.

To hang on such a cross doesn't bring shame, especially to those who are servants of God. Rather, this is something in which such people glory. *"Far be it from me to glory in anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me and I to the world"*. That is St. Paul.

A crucifixion like this is something that ought to continue throughout one's entire life. It is not something that should fill only 40 of the days of each year. Recall that Moses and Elijah, and Our Lord himself, fasted for forty days. We are meant to see in them symbols of the Law, the Prophets and the Gospel. We are to learn from them not to cling to the life we know now, or to imitate the ways of those who have no other hope than a worldly one. We are to nail everything that is unregenerate in us to the Cross.

It is characteristic of dedicated Christians to live this way always. They never want to come down from this cross until they are taken into God's Kingdom. If we don't live in this way, we will end up sinking into what are called "worldly ways". If, then, the Cross is to epitomize the Christian way of living it can't be simply something for forty days, or do you want to imitate Christ for only this short time? In fact, carrying this sort of Cross is a path to renewal and transformation and joy. We can always rejoice in the Lord. He has found us and drawn us into a Heavenly way of life more blessed than any other.