



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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RHYTHM AND BLUES

There comes a time in the life of every serious Christian when prayer seems to be going nowhere fast. All spiritual discipline seems futile. Going to church seems useless. There are just lots of distractions, and concentration on the prayers or the hymns or the sermon or the lessons is impossible. This is the more frustrating when it occurs after a goodly period of disciplined effort at the spiritual life. One expects these things to get better and instead they seem to be getting worse.

When this happens, private prayer is hit even harder. There is no refreshment from meditation, no satisfaction from the daily office. One has no sense of God being present in any of it. There are no fresh insights into the meaning of the faith or into one's own character. When you sit down to pray, nothing good seems to happen at all. There is only distraction, boredom, effort without effect. The more you try to eliminate the distractions, the worse it seems to become.

Then you begin to wonder whether you are praying at all. Can this really be prayer? You feel that there must be something more to it. You may even remember a time when you first started praying (or even a time more recently), when prayer really felt great, a time when you felt close to God, and you looked forward to your prayer time each day. Since that is not true now, you feel something must be seriously wrong. You think you must have started doing something wrong that God would abandon you this way. Or you may come to the conclusion that this dismal state is reality, and the earlier excitement was an illusion. Either way, you begin to think that if this is what prayer is really like, you're not sure that you want any part of it.

Some people give up at this point in the Christian life, rather than work through the adversity. Others go off in search of spiritual kicks, seeking some extraordinary spiritual experience that will make them feel good.

The point is that this sort of adversity is a natural development in the spiritual life. It happens to virtually everyone who is serious about his prayer. If we can understand how it happens and why (it is for our benefit), then we will be prepared for it, and ready to make the most of it when it happens.

One of the principles of the spiritual life is called (the term was coined by C.S. Lewis) the Law of Undulation. This principle states that in the course of Christian life there are natural ups and downs. Sometimes it will feel like everything is great; at other times it will feel like everything is falling apart. This is natural to Christian life, even as there are similar rhythms in our physical lives. So just because everything feels bad does not necessarily mean that something is seriously amiss. It may just be the natural rhythm of spiritual life.

When we begin a life of prayer (and at intervals as time goes on), it is usually accompanied by a great sense of progress. We have new insights. We feel ourselves drawing close to God. It all feels great. This makes sense: God gives us this spiritual pleasure to draw us further into the spiritual life. It is an incentive for us to persevere and to grow spiritually: a form of positive reinforcement. Since our prayer is good for us, He wants to encourage us to continue and deepen it. So He makes it pleasant for us.

But the goal of the life of prayer is not spiritual pleasure but God Himself. We want to learn to love Him for Himself, because He is God, our Creator and Redeemer. As we progress, we must be weaned from the pleasure that God gives us in prayer. That way we will learn to love God for Himself rather than for the spiritual pleasures He gives us. We will learn to love the Giver and not just the gift.

So after a while, God withdraws the spiritual pleasures. This is what makes you feel so abandoned, and wonder what you are doing wrong. But what God is doing is teaching you that prayer is much greater than the spiritual pleasures. He wants to give you more of Himself, so He lets you pray without the pleasures. This helps us to desire God because He is God, and not because He makes us feel good. If we love our parents only because they give us candy and presents, that is hardly a very deep love. It is the same with God. If our love for Him is to grow, we must get past the pleasures.

This is usually what is happening when you feel like everything is going wrong in your prayer. Sometimes, however, there really is something wrong: a besetting sin that you have not recognized or dealt with. So just in case, it is a good idea to sit down and ask God if there is something (big) wrong. And then listen, hard and long. Be open to anything He may wish to say. If there is something wrong and you are open to God, He will surely tell you. If you don't hear anything, then assume that it is God weaning you from your pleasure. The counsel of a person experienced in the ways of the Spirit and familiar with the traditions of Christian spirituality can be invaluable at such times. He can offer an outside opinion on what's going on, as well as some much needed moral support in a time of trial.

We are to learn from these times of difficulty that God is not to be confused with the pleasures He gives us. We are also to learn that God can be found in adversity as well as in prosperity. We learn that even though it does not feel as though He is near, He is. We learn that even in the trial He is caring for us. We learn (usually afterwards) that it really is all for our good.

By learning to find Him even when He seems to be absent, we learn how to find Him in other unlikely places. In pain and suffering we will find Him. We would deny this if all we knew of God in prayer was pleasure. Instead, through our own trial in prayer, we learn the technique of finding him in all sorts of adversity. So when we are sick or in pain, when we are faced with death, we will know that God is present, ready to redeem the situation, and always caring for us. We will learn in our own experience that the Cross is as Christian as the Resurrection.

These times of adversity in prayer, though difficult and sometimes painful, are wonderful opportunities for growth. Understanding what is going on is part of the key to making the most of them. We will not fight it so much if we know (intellectually at least) what is going on. It will still feel just as bad, but with our understanding we can keep telling ourselves that it doesn't mean that prayer is futile and that God has abandoned us.

In addition to understanding, there are several things to do when the situation arises. First, ask God if there is something major wrong. Then if nothing is suggested, perseverance is the order of the day. Go on with your routine of prayer, even though it seems fruitless. Be faithful in your attendance at the Eucharist, even though distractions and evil thoughts about your neighbors seem more common than anything pious. If you are to be weaned from your feelings (and that is the point), you must act as you know you should even though your feelings do not support it. This is a time of training for the will. It learns to operate on the basis of what is, rather than what it feels.

Your perseverance will be helped by seeing your adversity as God's discipline, His training for you. For if He disciplines you, it means that He cares about you. The parent who cares about the child takes the effort to discipline him; the one who doesn't really care doesn't bother. It is God treating you as His child. And that is cause for rejoicing. So even in the midst of the adversity, you can rejoice that He is treating you as a child of the Household of God. (This is all in Hebrews 12.)

Similarly, you can recall that Jesus too suffered. Upon the Cross He experienced that same abandonment (though it must have been so much more profound for Him, after His intimacy with the Father), as He cried out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Jesus knows what it is like to be abandoned. He knows what you are experiencing, for He has gone through it Himself. Read Psalm 22. You are not the first to experience this: the Psalmist gives it eloquent expression in many places. But even as you try to share your experience with Jesus, remember that Jesus' adversity led to the Resurrection. It led to the fulness of all that God had prepared for Him. It will be the same for you, if like Jesus you persevere in all that God has called you to.

Even if it feels like it, it is not the end of the world. You know that intellectually. That will help you to raise your eyes a bit from your own adversity, and see that the world is still good, that God still loves you, and that redemption is not far away.

Prayer is God's gift to us. That means that we must let Him pray in us however He wants. We know that whatever comes out, it will be for our good. How, then, can we demand that He always pray in a way that pleases us? It is childish of us to demand that he give us a bicycle instead of a canoe. He will always give us what is best for us. Sometimes it is best for us to pray out of the depths of despair: sometimes that is what we need and what is most pleasing to Him. Other times, our prayer will be one of great sweetness and delight. That too, will be good for us. Whatever the particular kind of prayer that God gives us, it will be just what we need to grow into the full stature of Jesus Christ.
