

ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN TIMES

BY JIM MERSEREAU

The ancients knew something about connecting with God that has been largely lost to modern Christians. Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi, Thomas a Kempis, George Fox and others like them told of experiencing God in ways that are almost beyond imagining for most Christians of our day.

Driven by a deep desire to truly know God, and by weaving the practice of the classic spiritual disciplines into the fabric of their lives, these men and women told of divine mysteries revealed, of achieving a depth of insight and understanding that was truly remarkable, and of personal interaction with God that almost staggers the modern imagination. There is much we can learn from those ancient mystics of the Christian faith.

A.W. Tozer lived in the mid 20th century and was considered by many to have been a modern Christian mystic. A diligent student of the ancient wisdom writers, his own writings have come to be considered by many as part of that special body of contemplative mystic literature. Writing about what he considered to be the sad and superficial state of Christianity in his day Tozer lamented:

“The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshiping men. This she has done not deliberately, but little by little and without her knowledge; and her very unawareness only makes her situation all the more tragic.”¹

Tozer continued, *“With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adorning silence. Modern Christianity is simply not producing the kind of Christian who can appreciate or experience the life in the Spirit.”²*

What was true in 1961 when Tozer wrote those words applies exponentially to American Christians today. If ever there was a generation in need of recapturing some of that ancient wisdom it would be ours. Knowledge we have, wisdom not so much. We are awash in information and therefore possess much data on many subjects, but on the one subject that really matters, a deep and intimate relationship with the Living God of Creation, we are sadly superficial. It is time to rediscover divine mysteries. It is time to explore the wisdom of the ancients.

The wisdom of the ancients grew out of what has come to be called the *“contemplative lifestyle.”* Being contemplative means, in its simplest form, to sit quietly before the Lord and simply listen. It does not involve Bible reading, talking to God, or in any other way attempting to interact with Him. In its purest form contemplation means to quietly sit before God, thinking deeply about Him, and savoring His presence. It is based on the command given in Psalm 46:10 where God instructs us to, *“Be still, and know that I am God.”* That’s the starting place of contemplation.

In time, and with practice, the individual learns to develop a contemplative mind-set that

carries over into all of life. At this stage contemplation goes from being a state of mind that exists for a predetermined and set-aside period of solitude, and evolves into a lifestyle. Now the person finds he or she is able to conduct the daily affairs of life while maintaining a God-consciousness, an awareness of the continuous presence and reality of God in the middle of the normal busyness of life. This is also frequently referred to as active contemplation. Active contemplation is that special “with-God life” that the ancients wrote of and which we moderns need.

Perhaps the most celebrated example of the contemplative lifestyle is Nicholas Herman of France, better known as Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a Carmelite monk in the mid to late 1600s. He lived and served in a monastery near Paris. During those years he worked mostly in the hospital kitchen helping to prepare meals and washing the pots and pans. Through the course of his life he became known, first within his monastic community, but eventually throughout Europe, for his quiet and serene faith, and for his simple but profound experience of the presence of God.

Following the teachings of some of the great contemplatives who came before him such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas a Kempis, Lawrence learned how to wed the practice of contemplation to his daily activities; so much so that he described his times of washing pots and pans in the kitchen as being as spiritually profound as the most sacred times of prayer in the chapel.

Christians from across Europe came to Brother Lawrence for instruction, counseling and mentoring. After his death in 1692 a collection of his letters on the subject of the contemplative lifestyle were published under the title “*The Practice of the Presence of God.*” In a little more than three hundred years that volume has become one of the best selling Christian books of all time.

Although Brother Lawrence may be the best known and most celebrated example of the life of active contemplation, he is by no means the only one. Through the ages of Christian history many have written of achieving an almost mystical ongoing awareness of the presence of Christ in the midst of daily activity. The question for modern readers is whether or not such an awareness of God can be achieved by Christians today. I propose that it can be and I believe it is developed through the practice of good discipleship.

Author Eugene Peterson once described Christian discipleship as a “long obedience in the same direction.” By that he meant that this business of growing in Christ-likeness, and of becoming increasingly aware of Christ’s presence with us and in us, is a process that plays out over a lifetime. Peterson was referring to what theologians call “the process of sanctification.”

Sanctification is a Biblical doctrine which holds that beginning at the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit of God begins a long slow process of progressively transforming a Christian to become more and more Christ-like. The process is aided by the Christian voluntarily and regularly participating in the basic disciplines of the practice of the faith. Those disciplines include things like prayer, Bible study, worship, fasting, solitude, service, and fellowship with other Christians. Each of those practices helps to place the Christian in a position before God whereby He can facilitate and accelerate the transforming process of sanctification.

It was in this process of sanctification that both the ancient and modern mystics discovered their ever-deepening awareness of the presence of God. It is through the long obedience of daily prayer and Bible study, of regular times of both private and corporate worship, of extended periods of solitude and fasting, as well as acts of service to those in need

and time spent enjoying the company of other Christians, that an awareness of the ever-present reality of God is developed.

We are talking about a life that is truly lived in pursuit of a real and dynamic relationship with God. It is a life that longs for God, *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”* (Psalm 42:1). It begins in solitude, *“Be still and know that I am God.”* (Psalm 46:10) But quickly takes on the character described by the Apostle Paul, *“For to me, to live is Christ ...* (Philippians 1:21) What Paul meant was that for as long as he was to go on living, his goal was to know Christ, to be in close relationship with Him, and to become more like Him.

Although there will certainly be times of spiritual dryness, even in the life of the most spiritually mature individual, this life of active contemplation is distinguished by increasing evidence of what Paul termed in Galatians 5:22-23 “the fruit of the Spirit.” *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* These attributes, or fruit, of the Spirit within you become more and more an observable part of your own character. This is what the mystics, ancient and modern, experienced and wrote about. It is the quiet peace, joyful disposition and serene faith that characterized Brother Lawrence.

It should be noted these fruits of the Spirit are experienced and are evident despite adverse outward circumstances. Many of the great saints of the faith endured tremendous persecution, poverty and suffering and yet experienced a great inner peace, tranquility and strength. That’s because the power of the Spirit in them was greater than the opposition and turmoil around them. So rather than the impact of adverse external circumstances penetrating the heart and creating despondency and despair in the inner person, the power of the Holy Spirit welled up and flowed out of them giving them the strength, courage and perseverance to live well in the face of difficult circumstances. The same can be true of us. Being in the presence of God, and knowing it, changes a person. The Apostle Paul wrote of this in Philippians 4:11b-13,

“...for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

A life of active contemplation, one in which the individual is acutely aware of the real and continuous presence of God, is attainable by genuine seekers in every generation, including ours. It need only be pursued with passion and diligence.

The body of literature on the nature and practice of active contemplation is extensive and can at first appear daunting. A good beginning approach would be to survey the field by doing some selective reading. In addition to *“The Practice of the Presence of God”*, by Brother Lawrence, suggestions for further reading include *“The Imitation of Christ”*, by Thomas a Kempis; *“Letters by a Modern Mystic”*, by Frank Laubach; *“In Pursuit of God”* by A.W. Tozer; *“The Gift of Contemplation”* by Thomas Merton; and *“Celebration of Discipline”*, by Richard Foster.

1. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. vii
2. *Ibid.*, p.viii