



# Be still.

*“Oh for one of those  
touches of Thy Spirit  
that, as the wind,  
quickens, and  
awakens, loosens  
and inspires!”*

“SO IS EVERY ONE THAT IS  
BORN OF THE SPIRIT.”  
JOHN 3:8



## Passion *and* the Desert

from “Reaching for the Invisible God” by Philip Yancey

Thomas à Kempis, author of *The Imitation of Christ*, lamented, “And I, unhappy one and poorest of men, how shall I bring you into my house, I who scarce know how to spend a half-hour devoutly? and would that I spent once, even one half-hour worthily!”

In the courtship period, we get to know God; in the honeymoon period we move from knowing to loving; in the long years of day-by-day married life, we move from loving to truly loving. As any married person can tell you, the final stage of mature love involves more tedium than romance, and the same applies to a relationship with God. Thus a season of dryness may signify growth, not failure.

I discovered a similar pattern in the Bible itself, especially in the Old Testament. Many of the Psalms recount times of dryness and darkness, and Jesus quoted from some of the bleakest. Paul and other letter-writers of the New Testament may describe the Christian life in glowing terms, but reading

between the lines you realise that they wrote because few of their readers were experiencing anything like the victory toward which they were being exhorted. Prayer arises from incompetence, otherwise there is no need for it.

I now see that it is our neediness, our sense of incompleteness, or dryness that drives us to God. Grace comes as a gift, received only by those with open hands, and often failure is what causes us to open our hands.

When we receive God’s grace and spiritual life begins, tension increases as well. A perfect saint would experience no tension, nor would a sinner untroubled by guilt. The rest of us must live somewhere between the two extremes, which complicates rather than simplifies life.

“Nothing is happier than the Christian,” Saint Jerome wrote, “for to him is promised the kingdom of heaven: nothing is more toil-worn, for every day he goes in danger of his life. Nothing is stronger than he, for he triumphs over the devil: nothing is weaker, for he is conquered by the flesh... The path you tread is slippery, and the glory of success is less than the disgrace of failure.” Asked whether he was filled with the Spirit, Dwight L. Moody replied, “Yes. But I leak.”

So which is it, fullness or dryness, light or

darkness, victory or failure? If pressed to answer, I would suggest, “Both.” Chart out a course that guarantees a successful prayer life, the active presence of God, and constant victory over temptation, and you will probably run aground. A relationship with an invisible God will always include uncertainty and variability.

I prefer to dodge the question, however, because **I believe it is the wrong question.** As I look back over the giants of faith, all had one thing in common: neither victory or success, but *passion*. **An emphasis on spiritual technique may well lead us away from the passionate relationship that God values above all.** More than a doctrinal system, more than a mystical experience, the Bible emphasises a relationship with a Person, and personal relationships are never steady-state.

I cringe at the homespun preachers I hear on radio and television, and wonder at their appeal, especially among the poor. Perhaps they appeal because they present a God whom someone can know and love. Jesus said we must enter the kingdom as little children. Children do not understand relationship: they simply live it.

“I used to think that the ideas of a God who fumed with rage, who was jealous, who

burned with love and could be disillusioned were childish, human, alas, all too human," writes theologian Jürgen Moltmann. "The abstract god of the philosophers, purified of all human images, seemed to me nearer to the truth. But the more I experienced how much abstraction destroyed life, the more I understood the Old Testament passion of God and the pain which tore the heart of this God."

God's favourites responded with passion in kind. Moses argued with God so fervently that several times he persuaded God to change his mind. Jacob wrestled all night long and used trickery to grab hold of God's blessing. Job lashed out in sarcastic rage against God. David broke at least half the Ten Commandments. Yet never did they wholly give up on God, and never did God give up on them. God can handle anger, blame, and even willful disobedience. **One thing, however, blocks relationship: indifference.** "They turned their backs to me and not their faces," God told Jeremiah, in a damning indictment of Israel.

Adult Children of Alcoholics, an organisation that works with families afflicted by alcoholism, identifies three coping mechanisms children learn in order to survive such a dysfunctional setting: Don't Talk, Don't Trust, and Don't Feel. Later, as adults, these same survivors find themselves incapable of sustaining an intimate relationship and must unlearn the pattern of indifference. Christian counsellors tell me that wounded Christians may relate to God in the same way. Reacting against a strict upbringing or feeling betrayed by God, they quench all passion and fall back on a more formal, less personal faith.

In contrast, a healthy relationship sustains passion through sad or happy times, through victory or failure, and even through physical separation. Absence provokes as much passion as presence. When a soldier leaves home on active duty or a teenager graduates from high school and heads for college, emotions do not fade away; they may intensify. Estrangement arouses passion too, as any divorcing family can testify.

**From the spiritual giants of the Bible, I learn this crucial lesson about relating to an invisible God: Whatever you do, don't ignore God.** Invite God into every aspect of life. For some Christians, the times of Job-like crisis will represent the greatest danger. How can they cling to faith in a God who appears unconcerned and even hostile. Others, and I count myself among them, face a more subtle danger. An accumulation of distractions—a malfunctioning computer, bills to pay, an upcoming trip, a friend's wedding, the general busyness of life—gradually edges God away from the centre of my life. Some days I meet people, eat, work,

make decisions, all without giving God a single thought. And that void is far more serious than what Job experienced, for not once did Job stop thinking about God.

A relationship with God does not switch on or off depending on my behaviour. God does not send me to a vacant room down the hall when I disobey him. Quite the opposite. The times when I feel most estranged from God can bring on a sense of desperation, which presents a new starting point for grace. Sulking in a cave in flight from God, Elijah heard a gentle whisper that brought comfort, not a scolding. Jonah tried his best to run from God and failed. And it was at Peter's lowest point that Jesus lovingly restored him.

In a Bible study I attended, a friend made this remark about King David's life: "If Saul proves that 'To obey is better than sacrifice,' then David proves that relationship is even

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better than obedience.' Though some may quarrel with that wording, David's story does at least show that a relationship with God can survive the most appalling acts of disobedience. I keep thumbing back to the story of David because I know no better model for a passionate relationship with God than the king named David. His very name meant, appropriately, "beloved."

An unavoidable question dangles over the account of David's life. How could anyone so obviously flawed—he did, after all, commit adultery and murder—get the reputation as "a man after God's own heart"? We have much to draw from in answering that question, for the pages devoted to David give the fullest treatment of any person in the Bible, including Jesus. Apparently God felt this remarkable man has a lot to teach us.

As I review David's story in search of his spiritual secret, two scenes stand out. The first suggests an answer to that unavoidable question. In one of his first official acts as king, David sent for the sacred ark to install as a symbol of God's presence in Jerusalem, the new capital city he was building. When

the ark finally arrived, to the accompaniment of a brass band and the shouts of a huge crowd, King David totally lost control. Bursting with joy, he cartwheeled in the streets—like an Olympic gymnast who has just won the gold medal and is out strutting his stuff. The sight of a king doing somersaults in a scanty robe scandalised his wife until David set her straight. "I will become even more undignified than this," he told her. "I will celebrate before the Lord." David cared not a fig about his royal reputation as long as that one-Person audience could sense his jubilation.

A man of passion, David felt more passionately about God than about anything else in the world, and during his reign that message trickled down to the entire nation. As Frederick Buechner writes,

He had feet of clay like the rest of us if not more so—self-serving and deceitful, lustful and vain—but on the basis of that dance alone, you can see why it was David more than anybody else that Israel lost her heart to and why, when Jesus of Nazareth came riding into Jerusalem on his flea-bitten mule a thousand years later, it was as the Son of David that they hailed him.

The second scene occurred years later, at the peak of David's powers, and more than any other it shows the king's greatness. David had just acted out one of the world's oldest plot lines: man sees woman, man sleeps with woman, woman gets pregnant. Nothing unusual there. Substitute a politician, actor, millionaire—or evangelist—for the king, and a beauty queen for Bathsheba, and you can read the same story in any modern scandal sheet. What else is new?

The episode with Bathsheba reveals a Machiavellian side to David. When his plan to cover up the adultery failed, he turned to a ruthless scheme involving the husband's murder and needless slaughter on a battlefield. A classic case of "one crime leads to another" ensued as David, the nation's spiritual leader, broke the sixth, seventh, ninth, and tenth commandments in quick succession. When Bathsheba moved into the palace and married David, it appeared he had gotten away with the crime. No one raised a word of protest—except the prophet Nathan.

I love the scene told in 2 Samuel 12 because of what it demonstrates about the power of story. Nathan began with a tale of callous greed—a rich man with many sheep who stole his poor neighbour's single pet lamb—and after two paragraphs had David wrapped around his narrative finger. Then Nathan risked his life by making a direct application to the sin-drenched king. What happened next brought to light David's true greatness. David could have had Nathan killed. Or he

could have laughed and thrown him out of the palace. He could have issued a string of denials—what evidence could Nathan produce? Would servants testify against their king?

Anyone who has lived through the sordid affairs of Watergate and Monica-gate has a sense for what David *could* have done. The Republican Richard Nixon lied and authorised hush money to cover up his crimes; a tape-recording, not a confession, led to his impeachment. Nixon could barely force himself to mutter, “Mistakes were made”; Clinton admitted only what had been proven and broadcast to the world.

The contrast of David’s first words could not be greater: “I have sinned against the Lord.” Not the cuckolded husband Uriah, not the mistress Bathsheba, not the spin-doctor Joab came to mind—God did. As he had danced before a one-Person audience, so David had sinned before that same audience.

A reflective poem he wrote, Psalm 51, may stand as the most impressive outcome of David’s sordid affair. It is one thing for a king to confess a moral lapse in private to a prophet and quite another for him to compose a detailed account of that confession to be sung throughout the land and ultimately around the world. This psalm exposes the true nature of sin as a broken relationship with God. “Against you, you only, have I sinned,” David cried out. He saw that God wanted “a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart”—qualities which David had in abundance.

Looking back on their greatest king, Israel remembered David more for his devotion to God than for his illustrious achievements. Lusty, vengeful King David had fully earned the reputation of “a man after God’s own heart.” He loved God with all his heart, and what more could be said?

David’s secret? The two scenes, one a buoyant high and the other a devastating low, hint at an answer. Whether cartwheeling behind the ark or lying prostrate on the ground for six straight nights in contrition, **David’s strongest instinct was to relate his life to God. In comparison, nothing else mattered at all.** As his poetry makes clear, he led a God-saturated life. “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you,” he once wrote in a desert. “My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water... Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.”

Apparently, the relationship got to God as well. Years later, when the Assyrian army was about to overwhelm Jerusalem, God worked a miracle of rescue, “for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!” He told the Jews his love for them would never end: “I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.” ■

## *Have you ever been carried away for him?*

THERE CAME A WOMAN HAVING AN ALABASTER BOX OF OINTMENT OF SPIKENARD VERY PRECIOUS; AND SHE BRAKE THE BOX, AND POURED IT ON HIS HEAD. AND THERE WERE SOME THAT HAD INDIGNATION WITHIN THEMSELVES, AND SAID, WHY WAS THIS WASTE OF THE OINTMENT MADE? FOR IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN SOLD FOR MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED PENCE, AND HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO THE POOR. AND THEY MURMURED AGAINST HER. AND JESUS SAID, LET HER ALONE; WHY TROUBLE YE HER? SHE HATH WROUGHT A GOOD WORK ON ME.

If human love does not carry a man beyond himself, it is not love. If love is always discreet, always wise, always sensible and calculating, never carried beyond itself, it is not love at all. It may be affection, it may be warmth of feeling, but it has not the true nature of love in it.

Have I ever been carried away to do something for God not because it was my duty, nor because it was useful, nor because there was anything in it at all beyond the fact that I love Him? Have I ever realised that I can bring to God things which are of value to Him, or am I mooning round the magnitude of His

Redemption whilst there are any number of things I might be doing? Not Divine, colossal things which could be recorded as marvellous, but ordinary, simple human things which will give evidence to God that I am abandoned to Him? Have I ever produced in the heart of the Lord Jesus what Mary of Bethany produced?

There are times when it seems as if God watches to see if we will give Him the abandoned tokens of how genuinely we do love Him. Abandon to God is of more value than personal holiness. Personal holiness focuses the eye on our own whiteness; we are greatly concerned about the way we walk and talk and look, fearful lest we offend Him. Perfect love casts out all that when once we are abandoned to God.

We have to get rid of this notion—“Am I of any use?” and make up our minds that we are not, and we may be near the truth. It is never a question of being of use, but of being of value to God Himself. When we are abandoned to God, He works through us all the time. •



• Oswald Chambers •

## *A bond-slave of Jesus*

I AM CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST: NEVERTHELESS I LIVE; YET NOT I, BUT CHRIST LIVETH IN ME.

These words mean the breaking of my independence with my own hand and surrendering to the supremacy of the Lord Jesus. No one can do this for me. I must do it myself. God may bring me to the point three hundred and sixty-five times a year, but He cannot put me through it. It means breaking the husk of my individual independence of God, and the emancipation of my personality into oneness with Himself, not for my own ideas, but for absolute loyalty to Jesus. There is no possibility of dispute when once I am there.

Very few of us know anything about loyalty to Christ—“*For my sake.*” It is that which makes the iron saint.

Has that break come? All the rest is pious fraud. The one point to decide is—Will I give up, will I surrender to Jesus Christ, and make no conditions whatever as to how the break comes? I must be broken from my self-realisation, and immediately that point is reached, the reality of the supernatural identification takes place at once, and the witness of the

Spirit of God is unmistakable—“I have been crucified with Christ” (RV).

The passion of Christianity is that I deliberately sign away my own rights and become a bond-slave of Jesus Christ. Until I do that, I do not begin to be a saint. •

## *Prayers*

HOW MY HEART AND FLESH CRY OUT FOR THE LIVING GOD! OH, THE ENERVATION OF MYSELF! AND OH, THE REFRESHMENT AND JOY OF THE LORD!

LORD, SOFTEN AND SUBDUE, INSPIRE AND THRILL, AND RAISE US INTO THE LEVEL OF SUCH GLORIOUS COMMUNION WITH THEE THAT WE MAY CATCH THY LIKENESS.

LORD, BREATHE ON ME UNTIL MY FRAME IS KNIT TO THY THOUGHT. LIFT ME UNTIL I SEE THY FACE AND TRUST THINE ALMIGHTINESS WITHOUT FEAR OR INSIDIOUS UNBELIEF.

HOW I LONG TO BE SO FULL OF THEE, BURNING AND SHINING AND IRRADIATING THEE, THAT THERE IS NO ROOM FOR ANYTHING BUT JUST THY GRACIOUS LIGHT.

O LORD, I SEEM AN INCARNATE DESERT BEFORE THEE, UNBEAUTIFUL AND ARID; BUT, PRAISE THY NAME, THOU CANST MAKE “THE DESERT REJOICE, AND BLOSSOM AS THE ROSE.”



Jesu, joy of man's desiring

God is our Last End as well as our First Cause. God possessed, our own God, that is creation's home, our last end, there only is our rest. Another day is gone, another week is passed, another year is told. Blessed be God, then, we are nearer to the end. It comes swiftly; it comes slowly, too.

Come it must, and then it will be all but a dream to look back upon. But there are stern things to pass through, and to the getting well through them there goes more than we can say. One thing we know, that personal love of God is the only thing which reaches God at last.

*F. W. Faber*



## Secret Fountains

My heart is resting, O my God;  
I will give thanks and sing;  
My heart is at the secret source  
Of every precious thing.  
Now the frail vessel Thou hast made,  
No hand but Thine shall fill;  
For waters of the earth have failed,  
And I am thirsting still.  
I thirst for springs of heavenly life,  
And here all day they rise;  
I seek the treasure of Thy love,  
And close at hand it lies.

*Anon.*

# A Passion for Christ

AND I TURNED TO SEE THE VOICE THAT SPAKE WITH ME... REV. 1:12

O my heart, yet could I rise,  
Ascend the olive mount of spice,  
Observe the oceans, as His Dove  
Surveys the waters of His love,  
Not seen on the earth, yet known above?

O my heart, pant yet for Him,  
This Spring that overflows my brim  
To other thirsty souls by thee.  
O, break my heart, Thou rushing Sea  
With holy waters far beyond  
My present love:  
this stagnant selfish pond.

O my heart, thou frozen tomb,  
A stillborn image from the womb;  
An heir to hell, thy blood is vice;  
Thy death could be no sacrifice.  
Put out thy self-consuming eyes  
And burn imagination's lies  
In holy fire, thy new desire.

O my heart, forget thyself  
And up through clouds obscuring delve  
With holy hands, and then obey  
That which His love commands today.  
For then His gentle, tender looks  
Will splash upon thee, smiling brooks  
To fill thy dry remembrance books  
And flood the longing, empty nooks  
Within thy soul, God's own earthen bowl.

O my heart, with rapture gaze  
Upon the deep and living bays  
Of love eternal. He who prays  
Shall have his inner being full  
Of heaven's streams, and others pull  
From fire without to fire within,  
To Christ in them and they in Him.  
Frail heart, despise thy lust and pride  
And boldly in His light abide;  
But who shall be His bride?

O my heart, His holy hill  
May be ascended. Be thou still  
And wait upon thy Bridegroom fair,  
Whose eyes are suns, and snow His hair,  
Whose voice like riverfalls doth sound,  
Whose fiery footsteps quake the ground,  
Whose city rests on heaven's peak:  
Jerusalem the nations seek,  
Whose jewels are saints,  
whose slopes are spiced,  
Whose King rules kings. Thou art enticed  
By heaven's Man, thy Lover, Christ.

O my heart, thy passion burns  
To see the One thy love concerns,  
To be His faithful lover, or  
His temple that thou mayest adore  
And feel His feet upon thy floor!

Hark! He speaks in gentle prose:  
"Thou art the garden of the Rose."  
His living breath upon me blows:  
"The city that thou seekest here  
My temple is, supremely dear.  
My light and life doth fill its heart.  
My temple then thou surely art.  
And as My love doth burn inside,  
My love, thou truly art My bride.  
I bled to have thee at My side.  
Rise up, My fair one,  
And come away with Me!"

O my Love, yet will I rise  
And taste Thine olive mountain's spice  
And fly with Thine eternal Dove.  
Wash over me, Thou Sea of love,  
Now known to me as known above.  
My Lord! My Life! My Love!

Michael Bull

# Love to Christ

from "Heavenly Springs" by Andrew Bonar

Felt something of "my soul longeth,  
yea, even fainteth," and I lie down this  
night intensely desiring to feel constrained  
by the love of Christ.

*I have been getting remarkable glimpses of  
Divine love in answer to earnest prayer that I  
might know "the love that passeth knowledge."*

"He that keepeth My commandments is he  
whom I love, not he that has a great glow  
of feeling toward Me."

*There are degrees of love. He will take the  
little, but He likes to have the much.*

If we had half the anxiety to know the love  
of God that He has to make it known to us,  
we should never be in darkness.

*Let the love of Christ take possession  
of your heart, and you will find you are  
living for Him without an effort.*

"In Him, verily, is the love of God perfected."  
The love of God is blossoming out and  
bearing fruit in the man who keeps  
His commandments.

*We have but one thing to do, we have  
but one Person to please.*

*Has your life been thus simplified?*

John did not rise from the table because  
there was a doubt about himself and his  
steadfastness. He leaned all the harder on  
his Master's bosom.

*The more of Christ we enjoy,  
the more we are able to bear.*

Never drink at the cistern before  
going to the Fountain.

*Our heaven is up yonder with God.  
God's heaven is down here upon earth with us.  
His delights are with the sons of men.*