

## Experiencing the Divine

by John Wittle

Along with the strenuous life of outward activity in which we all share, there is always growing within us a secret interior life of the Spirit. One can see at times, upon reflection, the gradual upward spiral of spiritual apprehension and enjoyment that is taking place. Times for reflection are good for this reason; times of quiet, in which the Beloved's voice is heard, are essential.

As a young man, opening myself as best I could to the winds of the Spirit, I read a book called *The Way Into The Holiest*, by F.B. Meyer. A most signal aspect of my life has been how God has brought such books my way at special times of inner longing. This book was one. Reading widely is one means of fanning the inner flame of desire and increasing our God-consciousness. The fire, in turn, produces light for the path we are treading. But this fire is the root of the light. So we must feed the inner fire.

*The Way Into The Holiest*, a powerful exposition of the Hebrew epistle, is an impelling description of our advance in the inner life of communion with God, and of our enjoyment of Him. The title refers to the establishing of the tabernacle of old, ordered by God as a prescribed approach for the Israelitish priesthood: first the outer court, then the holy place, and a third section, "beyond the veil," called "The Holiest of All."

In the outer court there was the brazen altar—the place of daily sacrifice for sin. Then came the holy place with its altar of incense, table of shewbread, and the seven-branched golden candlestick. In the third section, there was the manifest presence of God in a visible fire, called "The Shekinah Glory," above the ark of the covenant—the glory of God among His people. All these are beautiful symbols for us of the progressive experience of man's approach to the Divine. It is a pictorial way of showing how God brings man into what David called, "*The secret place of the Most High.*" It is the fullest realization of God's continual presence in us, on the basis of the work of redemption, depicted in the sacrifices of the outer court, foreshadowing Christ's ministry—His body and blood given for us.

So now in the New Testament era of the Spirit, we have become the tabernacle or temple of God through the Spirit. We also are the priests, given to a life of intercession. But in this holiest of all, we are caught up into, and may live in, the light of the "*glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,*" as Paul says. We are "*beyond the veil,*" in the secret of union with the Beloved. The veil has been rent, as the Scripture says, meaning there is free access to this life of union and the experience of the Divine. (I can't resist a *Hallelujah* right here!) In a life of love and adoration we are always exposed to Him and He to us.

That glorious hymn of the Church, Eternal Light, says:

*. . . how pure the soul must be  
When, placed within Thy searching sight,  
It shrinks not, but, with calm delight,  
Can live, and look on Thee!*

Yet this is precisely our present and future place in our experience of the Divine. It is the place of contemplation and adoration. As John said, "*We beheld His glory.*" Paul writes, "*But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord*" (2 Cor. 3:18). We do not conjure up Christ's physical features, but are bathed in the light that shines from His face. This is the interior life we live, which becomes fuel for our life of intercession in the world He died for.

Do you remember the little picture of the Mikado of Japan who required of his poetess a poem on the beautiful "Morning Glory"? Well, after weeks she appeared before him with only the written words (no doubt beautifully written!) "*O Morning Glory!*" As she had looked on the flower with the fresh dew of morning upon it, and the earth filled with fragrance of dawn, all she could do was to exclaim, "*O Morning Glory!*" So with us—words cease at times and we simply behold His glory.

This brings to mind another and richer exclamation. Someone wrote, having in mind the Cross: "*O Tree, without a root, which bears such fruit!*" Ponder that and worship. The root, of course, is found in the heart of God.

For most of us there are three phases of inner life. First, there is the *mental pursuit*; then *meditation, reflection, contemplation, and adoration*; and then maybe for some, and at some times, the experience of ecstasy. Also *silence* comes in here somewhere. While all of us do not share in a given or special order, these are the main elements experienced by most who dwell in God.

God is in the business of bringing light out of darkness (see 2 Cor. 4:6). The result for us who have "*sat in darkness*" is the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ! If one were bold enough to ask, "What then is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," who could or would attempt to answer? If we attempt an answer, it could only describe a fragment of that majestic radiance. But it seems to me that the impact made on the seeking and seeing heart is a blend of infinite holiness, profound peace, exquisite joy and total acceptance. How do you see Him? I mention these qualities because they seem to be the overwhelming hunger of our hearts, and therefore what the divine Love gives us. For that hunger is actually God Himself creating in us an expression of His glory.

*Jesus, may all confess Thy name,  
Thy wondrous love adore;  
And, seeking Thee, themselves inflame  
To seek Thee more and more.*

*O Jesus, Light of all below!  
Thou fount of living fire,  
Surpassing all the joys we know,  
And all we can desire . . .*

Does it seem strange that I have left out love in the blend mentioned above? Well, I see love to be the total impact of that glory upon us. Its white light is broken down for us into the many aspects of the living Presence, according to our need.

So we often start our pursuit of God with some form of mental action or routine in which we are caught up with disciplines and duties such as reading and praying. This often ends up producing guilt, because of our frequent failure to perform. Or it can lead to the pride of self-effort!

Then in some way or other, the Spirit of God, who is faithful to the hungering heart, will catch us and bring us into the liberty of an unstructured devotional life. This, to some, looks dangerous, but I have found it the only way to becoming spiritually natural. There will then be frequent times when we naturally enjoy His presence, and times when we find delight in the Scriptures, and are led on into the various enriching phases of inner worship, adoration, contemplation and silence. This all flows from, and engenders, the awareness of union. Union is not only a revealed fact, but an ever-increasing experience—"rivers to swim in."

One mystic wrote:

*The soul is now learning that union with God means a never ending journey towards Him, each stage of which is a new beginning . . . so the soul is never satisfied with her experience of God but presses on to ever new ways of union and mystical knowledge. For this is the great paradox of the mystical life, that desire is satisfied by the very fact that it remains unsatisfied.*

Johannes Kelpius, a seventeenth-century Protestant mystic, wrote:

*Since it is a truth belonging to the Christian faith that the infinite majesty of God and the whole adorable Trinity fills all things, so must the soul undertake an inward exercise of this faith and stir herself up, firmly believing this truth, that God the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost is in her, as well as in the place where she is, and in all places truly present.*

Let me mention another mystic—one I never thought of as such. Jonathan Edwards, born in 1703, became a preacher in New England and was used of God in a genuine revival. He says, after reading the words in 1 Timothy 1:17:

*As I read these words, there came into my soul, and was, as it were, diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the divine Being, a new sense, quite different from anything I ever experienced before . . . The sense I had of divine things, would often of a sudden, as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my heart; an ardor of my soul, that I know now how to express.*

As Rees Howells said of faith's development: "We gain positions of faith"; so it may well be in this inward experience of delighting in God, in contemplation, adoration and even ecstasy, that we gain certain stages as we give ourselves time to "wait on God," to use David's frequent phrase. Each must and will find for himself the way to feed the flame of loving desire and joy in God. The outward and active life of intercession will be fed by the inner fire of love and so will be strengthened more and more. None of this means that there will be no dry periods when this conscious intimacy seems in abeyance, but here faith takes us through, and is the foundation of all spiritual realities. Dry times are frequently times of great profit.

Make no mistake, mystical experiences are certainly part of the Church's normal milieu. Paul had his roots in some remarkable experiences that he had said were too unusual to utter. These were not necessarily visions or voices, though obviously Paul experienced great ecstasy (see 2 Cor. 12).

But what happened during that lengthy period he spent in Arabia? No doubt during that period there was established in him those fires of a rich inner communion that bore much fruit in his passionate ministry.

Our experiences flow from the reality of our union, but they must never replace our complete walk of and by faith. It is always a "*faith that works by love*" (Gal. 5:6). So, in closing, I share a word on love that I would not have merely in my memory, but burned into the depths of my heart. It is from our beloved brother, C.S. Lewis, writing at the close of an essay entitled *Agape*. He writes:

*The mystic's response to the Divine Lover is itself that Lover's gift. If he rises, he does so lifted on a wave of the incoming tide of God's love for him. As he will tell us, he becomes nothing in that ascension. His life is perfected, in becoming, in a sense, nothing. He is less than a mote in that Sunbeam, and vanishes—not from God's sight, but from ours and his own— into the nuptial solitude of the Love that loves Love, and in Love, all things.*

In my opinion, Lewis' observation strikes a little different note from what we are familiar with in our emphasis on the recognition of "who we are" as "executive sons" and "co-operators with the Divine." But it surely belongs to the special insight concerning the interior life available for us all. In it we are always total recipients of the love of the Beloved, and in Him receive all, and, dare I say, become all? From Him we *receive* all—to the world we give all.