

The Stepstool of Divine Ascent
The Burning Bush, Vol. 23 n.3, Winter 2010
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Prologue:

The Stepstool is not a ladder—nor a replacement for *The Ladder*. It is an invitation and a regimen: an invitation to the soul afraid of heights: come, ascend a few steps, and perceive your inner world from gentle elevations; a regimen for the one with feeble knees: come, exercise on these steps, and be strengthened to climb yet higher.[1]

Listen, O my soul ...

Step 1: Seek Stillness

Be still, and know that I am God.[2]

Strive to be like Mary, doing the one thing needful—listening with her whole being. But do not pretend that you are unlike Martha, distracting yourself with much busyness, being troubled and worried about many things. There is an outer stillness, a stillness of the body, and an inner stillness, a stillness of the soul. Being distracted with activities disturbs your outer stillness. Being anxious and fearful disturbs your inner stillness. The two are coupled, and early in one's regimen they are inseparable.[3]

Calm the senses, quiet the body, and at first the mind will become tranquil—then come distractions, and then storms, inner storms. The initial stillness is a resting place for God from which He reveals to you what is yet deeper in your soul. How you respond to the storms, to God's revelation about yourself, determines whether you are willing to be led by Him into the deeper regions of your own heart—or whether you will descend into despondency to be ravaged by the devil. God desires to descend to the Hades lying deep within your being. Where can I flee from Your presence? If I make my bed in Hades, You are there.[4]

Take up your cross and follow Me. Where did the Lord go upon taking up His cross? To Golgotha. Are you willing to follow him to Golgotha? To be crucified with Him? Where did your Lord go on the cross? To Hades. Are you willing to follow Him to Hades? To die with Him? Otherwise you will never find yourself, or be found by Him; you will never be set free; you will never be still in your innermost being, where the Kingdom of God resides. Hell and the Kingdom are very near one another, and the delicate choice between them is life and death. Choose wisely.[5]

Busyness is an escape—an escape from those whom you love, an escape from yourself, an escape from the present moment, an escape from the inner yearning and prompting for the stillness of the presence of God. You must see this: *you* use busyness to escape; it is an instrument, a weapon, *in your hands* directed against your own soul for your self-destruction. You busy your body so as to avoid the motions of your soul. You avoid the motions of your soul so as to avoid the quiet presence of God—and this is your death.

Agitation, disturbance, interruption: the awareness of these inner movements is God's call to be in His presence—His gift to you. He taps you on your inner shoulder and says, "I am here." At these moments, don't run; don't hide. Stop; be still; answer: "Here I am, Lord. What is it you want?" Listen. It is easy

to be mistaken about who is calling your name.[6]

And this is eternal life, that you may know the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom the Father has sent into the world He loves. Eternal life is not a duration but an experience. Temporal life is not biological, but relational. Having temporal life is not having a heart that beats and lungs that breath, but knowing another person—truly knowing. Eternal life is having the one we know, and by whom we are known, be the eternal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity is known in stillness.[7]

The ultimate expression of stillness is suffering, not suffering alone, but suffering with. As a sheep is led to the slaughter, or a lamb before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth. In His humiliation, justice was denied Him. For His life was taken up from the world—for the life of the world and its salvation. Stillness is the Lamb who is slain; it is the icon of the crucifixion. This is the peace that the world neither gives nor even understands: the quiet life of self-sacrificial death for another.[8]

His mother stands by the cross in silence and suffers, her soul pierced with a sword, but not alone. She is with her Son and Lord—His body pierced with a spear—and with the beloved disciple, John. Stand by the cross in quiet stillness, pierced in body and soul, to hear the words of your Lord: son, behold your mother. This is stillness.

There are three times a day to seek stillness: in the evening and in the morning for brief periods, lengthening the time only gradually so as not to be unsustainable. Thirdly, throughout the day as God awakens you with the awareness of your outer restlessness or your inner turbulence, be attentive to His words “I am here,” and reply “Here I am, Lord.”

Step 2: Offer Yourself

Be it done to me according to your word.[9]

With these simple words, Mary, a humble peasant girl, *offered* herself, and thereby became the Mother of our Lord. Through her complete and uncompromised surrender, the Son of God becomes Emmanuel—God *with us*. Her response was not for herself alone; it was *for us*, for the whole created world, for all that longs and groans for its redemption. Surrender to another human is captivity. Surrender to the One who has fashioned our innermost being is the liberation of all.[10]

In your search for stillness, God reveals what you use to escape the present, the presence of Christ, inner peace; listen to His revelation, and offer it back to him. Do not think that you can cleanse your life so as to be pleasing to God. No, not at all. It is the offering of yourself to God, true to who you are—with all your distractions, hurts, delights, sorrows, plans, resentments, pleasures, judgments, hopes, failures, desires, approbations; that is pleasing to God, that allows Him to make you holy and acceptable.[11]

What, then, is your means of escape? You may not be a drunk, but you grab a drink in response to stress. You may not be a glutton, but you eat to sooth your excited or dampened soul. You may not be a liar, but you speak to cloak your insecurities. Is this not drunkenness? Is this not gluttony? Is this not hypocrisy? Offer your escape routes to God, lest you be devoured by the roaring lion, and in due time He will exalt you.[12]

Do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. There is no

member of the body that is more in need of being presented to God than the tongue. Offer to God the 'need' to talk, to inform, to justify, to explain, to legitimize, to question, to inquire, to complain, to judge, to condemn, to belittle, to brag, to exaggerate, to tease, to patronize. Pour out your complaint *before Him*; proclaim your sadness *before Him*. Your tongue will then be quieted towards others by your offering to God—the offering of who you truly are to the One who truly longs to know you.[13]

What did the Mother of our Lord experience? Is your life hectic, seemingly out of your own control? Look at hers. The unjustified shame of pregnancy without marriage, the displacement to Bethlehem at the eleventh hour of her pregnancy, giving birth among the animals, the fear of Herod's threat to her Child, exile into Egypt, the painful awareness of the thousands of innocent children murdered at her Son's expense, the arduous return to Nazareth, the loss of her Son while returning from Jerusalem, and so much more. Among all people, who has had more of a 'right' to complain about being overwhelmed by events outside of her control than the Blessed Virgin? And yet, what did she do? She pondered these things in her heart. She remained silent, not simply the guarding of her mouth, but the inner stillness—the peace that the world cannot give, but that is granted by her Son alone, the peace that transcends fear and calms the troubled heart. This is a great offering. The one who controls his tongue controls his whole soul.[14]

This, then, is the second step: offer yourself—exactly as you are; no pretending; no hiding. Without seeking the stillness of Christ's presence, you will have nothing to offer; without offering what you receive on your path to stillness, you will never descend into the Kingdom of God within you.

There are three times a day to offer yourself to God: in the evening and in the morning offer those effusions that arise from your soul as you seek stillness. Thirdly, throughout the day as God awakens you with the awareness of your outer restlessness and your inner turbulence, offer to Him: "Here I am, Lord; be it done to me according to Your word."

Step 3: Give Thanks, Rejoicing in the Lord

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks.[15]

When you descend into your heart, and offer to God what you find there, it is He, and He alone, that brings your soul out of prison, the prison of your own passions and delusions; so that you may give thanks to His name, rejoicing in the miracles He has wrought in your own soul.[16]

Joy, like thanksgiving, is at once a gift and a decision. They are nothing without both. God provides the occasion; you respond by entering. Turning away from the occasion, neither glorifying God nor thanking Him, blinds you to His presence and to the occasion He provides.[17]

Beauty interrupts, and you call it ugly, inconvenient, rude, offensive, dangerous, disappointing. You miss beauty, the beauty of God's presence, because you have failed to give thanks and rejoice in all things. This is true even, and especially, for the beauty in your own soul. It is time for the Lord to act; don't blind yourself with ingratitude.[18]

Joy protects you from grudging and rote thanks. Rote thanks is no thanks at all. Grudging thanks is hypocrisy. Neither will open your eyes to the presence of the Kingdom within.

The Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.

The Eucharist *is* the giving of thanks with joy (even in the face of impending betrayal and death), and it has been handed down to you from the Lord Himself. Will you receive it? Listen. Having partaken of the divine, holy, most pure, immortal, heavenly, life-creating, and awesome mysteries of Christ, *worthily give thanks to the Lord*, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit is known in the breaking of the bread.[19]

Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving; and declare His works with rejoicing. Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters; they see the works of the LORD, and His wonders in the deep. See the wonders of the Lord in the deep—the deep within your own heart—only by the *sacrifice* of thanksgiving with rejoicing.[20]

The joy of thanksgiving is found in sacrifice, in surrender, in offering—experienced in the tranquility of your heart. United with Christ at the cross, experiencing your brokenness, you can exclaim: Let the bones that You have broken, rejoice.[21]

Thankfulness multiplies what you have to offer others. Joy reveals the light and presence of Christ at this moment and in this place, magnifying the Lord so that others might see Him in place of you. In this way, your 'Be it done *to me* according to Your word' becomes 'Emmanuel, *God with us*'—you act not for yourself alone, but for the life of the world and its salvation.[22]

The joy of the Lord is your strength. Whose joy? Your joy for the Lord, or the Lord's joy for you? Dare you be so bold to believe that your Lord takes joy in you, rejoices and delights in you? Amid stillness, and offering, and thankfulness, find within yourself the Lord's joy, His sheer delight, for you. This is a spring in a parched land, a place of refreshment. Drink deeply. It will become, if you let it, your joy for the Lord, and, together with His, a firm foundation that weathers life's storms, a place where your heart and flesh will sing for joy to the living God.[23]

This, then, is the third step: give thanks, rejoicing in the Lord—always and everywhere, whatever your circumstances. For such joyous gratitude is itself a volitional offering, and a step deeper into the path of stillness, where one knows God—and is known by Him. These three steps—stillness, offering, and joyous thankfulness—are woven together to form a strong cord, not easily broken, against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail.

There are three times a day to give thanks to God: in the evening and in the morning for the gift of the day with all the gifts it contains—even those that are disguised as troubles. Thirdly, throughout the day as God awakens you to His presence in the events and faces you greet, declare His wonders with rejoicing: "Here I am, Lord; thank You for being here too."

Epilogue:

The paradox of the Gospel is that you ascend by descent, the way up is down—down into the depths of your own soul, where Christ resides in His Kingdom--conquering the hell that you have created with your passions and thoughts. Humble yourself: ascend and descend the stepstool daily. It is at once your exercise, your *ascesis*, and the enlightening of the eyes of your heart. By regular practice you will come to dwell in the place where Christ dwells, in the stillness of the Kingdom within you, and at the appropriate time it will be God who raises you up.

Listen, O my soul ...

- [1] John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell tr. (Mahwahj, NY: Paulist Press).
- [2] Ps 46:10
- [3] Lk 10:38-41. *The Ladder*, pp. 261-2.
- [4] Ps 139. *The Ladder*, §27; this step is particularly useful for its emphasis on combating despondency when seeking stillness.
- [5] Mk 8:34. Eph 4:7-9.
- [6] I Sam 3.
- [7] Jn 17:3; I Cor 8:3; Gal 4:8. Ps 45:10. I Kg 19:12.
- [8] Is 53:7-8; Priest prayers in the Liturgy of Preparation of the Gifts.
- [9] Lk 1:38.
- [10] Is 7:14; Mt 1:22-24.
- [11] Rom 12:1-2.
- [12] I Pt 5:6-9.
- [13] Rom 6:13. Ps 142; Lam 2:18-19.
- [14] Lk 1-2; Pv 21:20; Jam 3:2-12.
- [15] I Thess 5:16-18.
- [16] Ps 142:7.
- [17] Rom 1:20-25.
- [18] Ps 119:126; Liturgy of St. John Chrysostomos.
- [19] 1 Cor 11:23-24. Litany of Thanksgiving from the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom; Lk 24:35.
- [20] Ps 107: 22-24.
- [21] Ps 51:8.
- [22] Mk 8:6-8; Jn 6:11-13. Lk 1:46-47. Mt 5:16. Jn 6:51; Priest prayers in the Liturgy of Preparation of the Gifts.
- [23] Neh 8:10; Mt 16:18. Ps 84:2.
- [24] Eccl 4:12.