

Personal History and Introduction to Christian *Spirituality*

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I usually begin every class with my personal testimony of how I came to Christ.

Most of you have already heard this and for those who have not, just ask and I can give you a YouTube link and you too can hear my story! LOL.

This is how I came into the knowledge and practice of *Spirituality*.

I will share my story, then we will give a definition to the term *Spirituality*.

I was a fairly good athlete growing up. I played basketball my first year in college.

I quit basketball and college in the middle of my first year to go with YWAM to Argentina for the World Cup Outreach in 1978.

I felt like I had a calling on my life.

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Watching a clock is a very slow way to pass time.

Much of my prayer life as a young, zealous man was spent opening my eyes to look at the clock to see how much “time” was left.

Learning how to pray seemed painful not just because of the agonizing ritual of watching the clock, but also because I was always on my knees.

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer. The joys I feel, the bliss I share...

Rarely did these lyrics express what I experienced in my prayer time.

I would pray for my family:

“Bless my mom...help her to know you better.”

“Please reveal Yourself to my dad.”

It only took me five minutes to get through my family.

Another five minutes would take me through my friends at school...and that included prayer for all my “lost” classmates.

Ok. I was a fairly new Christian and did not really know how to engage in all the various kinds of prayer: praise and adoration, intercession, etc.

But I had been told that **a good Christian** would spend an hour alone with God every day and I wanted to be a good, “spiritual” Christian.

REALLY mature Christians would spend an hour in prayer.

My “quiet time” would start with reading three chapters of the Bible, then I needed to pray. I would eventually move to reading ten chapters of the Bible which would eat more time off the clock.

I had to figure out ways to get an hour alone with God.

For a Type A, task-oriented, seventeen year old young man this was no easy task!

Eventually I would learn about journaling. That was a welcomed part of my discipline and would easily help me to burn 15 minutes.

A bit later in my Christian life I learned to play guitar. That also helped. I could easily spend another 15 minutes playing and singing a few worship songs.

Now I was beginning to feel “spiritual” – I could fill up an hour with solid activity!

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer. The joys I feel, the bliss I share...

There were always moments when something in the scriptures would speak to me.

And I had moments journaling and singing when I would feel the presence of the Holy Spirit.

These were some **rewards** from heaven that would encourage me to come back the next day.

I was making progress.

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How many of you can relate to this?
I have just described what the great "spiritual" writers called **discursive** disciplines.

discursive = "moving from one thing to another"

So you can see how I was searching for spiritual disciplines [like building a tool box] so I could invest *TIME* with God in order to grow...to be spiritual...

As an athlete I was the guy who stayed *after* practice to get in extra work.

I was that guy who refused to pace myself running sprints.

I tried to give 100% all the time.

It was easy for me to apply this same work ethic to my spiritual life.

I had been urged in various sermons to **memorize** scripture...YES!

Another *spiritual* tool in my tool box.

So I started using my daily 20 minute drive to the university to **memorize** passages.

By the end of my second year I had memorized:

- the Sermon on the Mount
- 2 Timothy
- the first three chapters of 1 John

These memorized portions of scripture were added to my disciplines.

I would use them to practice **meditation** during my devotional times.

I had filled my tool box with various tools.

I felt good about my spiritual disciplines and my walk with God.

I wanted to be *spiritual*, but I still had sins in my life...

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[14 min]

At this point in my young Christian life I had led 15-20 people to Christ.

I had been used in some crazy miraculous ways....

I was asked to speak at youth rallies and in churches.

Around this time a man I looked up to asked me if I had ever read Brother Lawrence.

When I answered “No” he handed me a copy of *The Practice of the Presence of God*

He told me that I needed to read it. I went home and started reading the Introduction.

I found myself thinking, “Why does James want me to read this guy? He’s a Catholic monk!?”

I struggled through the little book. It just did not make sense to me.

About a year later I had a different man, in a different city ask me, “Have you ever read Brother Lawrence?”

I answered “yes,” and he asked what I thought. I told him that I did not really understand the book.

“You need to read it again.”

I went home...pulled the little book off my shelf thinking, “God, I do not

understand why I need this book, but I will read it again.”

As I read Bro Lawrence the second time I found myself thinking,

“I kind of get it, but I just do not understand.”

After reading through it, I put the book back on my shelf and said to the Lord,

“Help me understand.”

Two years later I was being trained for campus ministry and one of my leaders asked me,

You guessed it...

“Have you ever read Brother

Lawrence?” He encouraged me to read the little book yet again. God was obviously trying to tell me something.

I have a vivid memory of reading *The Practice of the Presence of God* while sitting next to the heating radiator on a cold morning.

By this third reading I had started feeling some trust in this Catholic monk...when I read this:

...I consider myself as the most wretched of men. I am full of faults, flaws, and weaknesses, and have committed all sorts of crimes against [my] King.

Touched with a sensible regret I confess all my wickedness to Him. I ask His

forgiveness. I abandon myself in His hands that He may do what He pleases with me.

My King is full of mercy and goodness.

Far from chastising me,

He embraces me with love.

He makes me eat at His table.

He serves me with His own hands and gives me the key to His treasures.

He converses and

delights Himself with me incessantly...

And He treats me in all respects as His favorite. In this way I consider myself continually in His holy presence.

The Holy Spirit came on me...

and I began to weep.

As I read this passage I somehow experienced the grace of God in my heart.

As the following years rolled by I began to call this moment in my life my “grace awakening.”

For the first time in my Christian life I grasped **the grace of God**:

His love for me was
not based on me being holy,
not based on my service to Him,
not based on my spiritual disciplines,
which I had pursued with such
intensity.

His love for me was constant, even
WHILE I would give myself to
sinfulness. In the midst of my
failures His love hovered over me!

[23 min]

You can see the cover of this little book.

There are several versions of the book on Perlego.

THIS is the one I want you to start reading.

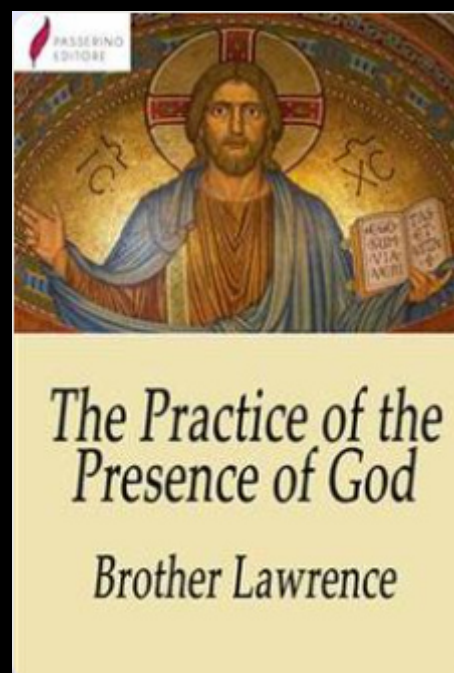
It is a short little book...
but it is powerful.

It is divided into conversations and letters that Lawrence wrote to some who visited the monastery for personal retreat.

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From that point forward in my life,
(that was 41 years ago)...

I describe this as the difference of
following Christ under the banner of
Law or **Grace**.



The "good" spiritual disciplines I had pursued had slowly become like **the Law** of God in my life.

When I gave myself to those disciplines I felt as though I was accepted by God.

When I failed to keep my disciplines or gave myself to sin, I felt no acceptance.

I began to realize that I had viewed my heavenly Father through the lens of my earthly father.

My dad was a disciplinarian. He would bark at me for failures, whip me for really bad behavior, but would rarely show me affection or

tell me he loved me.

I never really felt neglected.

BUT....Looking back the impression

I had was that...

I never felt like I could do a good enough job for my dad.

This became my lens for serving God. My spiritual disciplines became my efforts to gain God's approval and affection.

You will see as we go that this is the danger of spiritual discipline.

It can actually be used by the Kingdom of Darkness as a weapon against you.

This is part of what we will learn in this class....

Spiritual disciplines are good...

Unless you are doing them for the wrong reasons....wrong motivations.

And that is exactly what I had done.

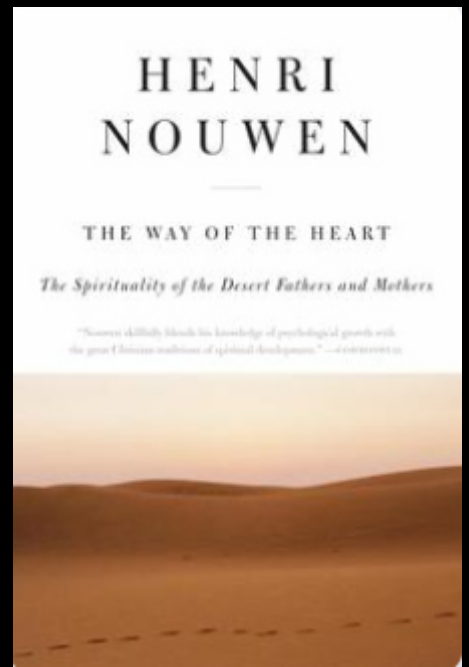
So what does it mean to gain this Presence of God in your life that is NOT based on your efforts?

This is the essence of what this class is about.

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[30 min]

Later that same year I was introduced to the Desert Fathers through Henri Nouwen's excellent devotional, *The Way of the Heart*.



This little book is also on Perlego - you need to read just the three main chapters:

- Solitude - Silence - Prayer
[actually, you can skip "Silence" if you want to - that chapter is a bit on the edge]

Brother Lawrence taught me not to quickly reject monks solely on the basis of being Catholic, and this short presentation of Solitude, Silence and Prayer added another dimension to my spiritual

disciplines. I began using silence in my prayer times as a way to learn how to listen.

Solitude and Silence

After my first child was born it became more difficult to find peace and quiet in my house for devotion.

I had become accustomed to spending two to three hours reading my Bible, writing in a journal, singing while playing my guitar and praying.

The ministry I was leading had grown and I was spending four to five hours every day with students and staff. I really needed time alone.

Once a week, often on a Saturday morning, I would drive out into the woods to practice my new discipline of solitude.

I found a pump station (a small brick building on a concrete slab) by the river.

Other than the actual structure no sign of humanity could be seen or heard. It was a perfect place to spend more than a few hours alone with God.

One day I set out with a bit more emotional urgency.

I had missed two or three weeks due to holidays and was feeling motivated to get myself isolated.

When I had finally settled down on the concrete pad, ready to get started, I picked up my guitar to play.

Beginning my devotional time with a few songs always seemed to prepare my heart.

I strummed the strings one time when I heard the voice of the Spirit say, "Put your guitar down."

Oh, that was a bit unusual.

“The Lord must want to speak to me through the scripture,” I thought. I put my guitar down and picked up my Bible.

Before I could even open the Bible I heard His voice again,
“Put your Bible down.”

“Ok, Lord. I guess You want me to journal.” I put my Bible down and grabbed my journal...

but before I could even get my journal to my lap I heard the voice again, “Put your journal down.”

I sat my journal down, but now I was a bit frustrated.

I leaned back against the wall and said, “What do You want me to do?”

I do not want to give the impression that I heard the voice of God this clearly all the time.

That would not be accurate.

But this was one of those times when I was hearing without effort...

And I was frustrated.

“What do You want me to do?,”
I complained to God.

“Do you have to be entertained?”

“Do I have to keep you amused?
Are you bored with just being in My
presence?”

By now I am feeling chastised, but
am also very happy to be hearing
God speaking so clearly. His voice
continued to ring in my inner ear.

So He continued...

“What if I want you to just sit with me
and enjoy being with me? Do we
have to DOING something?”

By this time my daughter was
probably three years old.

My wife worked during the day and I was Mr. Mom, doing as much work as possible from home and taking care of my daughter, Hope.

She and I were close, but honestly during the day I would push her to occupy herself so I could get work done:

administrative work, study, or talk with somebody on the phone.

Students and staff would also come to my house to meet with me. Many times Hope would play on the floor nearby.

Sometimes Hope would climb up on my lap while I was meeting with someone.

She would just sit in my lap quietly listening.

I would give her my wedding ring.

She loved to play with my ring.

She would put it on her finger...

and stick it on her nose...

Eventually she would grab my hand and put the ring back on my finger.

Occasionally she would fall asleep.

Usually as I was talking with a student or listening to them I would gently stroke Hope's hair or squeeze

her little arm or leg...and she would smile at me...perfectly content.

So when the Lord said something like, "Can't you just sit with me?"

my mind immediately thought of my little girl...

who just wanted to sit in my lap.

Now I am weeping.

I am hearing the voice of my heavenly Father

just wanting me to be content to just sit in His lap...and be in His presence!

My Type A, task-oriented personality is always looking for something to DO.

I needed to be busy.

I needed to be doing something productive and my spiritual disciplines fell into that rubric.

And now I am hearing the voice of my Heavenly Father...

asking me to just enjoy sitting with Him....

Doing nothing, but being with Him.

[40 min]

THIS was my first experience of
what I later learned was called...
contemplative prayer.

I learned this day that to sit with
God, in silence...
was learning how to just listen.

This became my new discipline...
I had no idea that this was the door
to Contemplative Prayer.

And in the academic world,
And in the world of the great
Christian writers...

THIS is called *spirituality.*

Contemplative Prayer is a discipline
of getting your heart and your mind
to be still....silent....and at rest...

To BE with God...

To Listen IF He wants to speak...

But if not,

Just to BE in HIS PRESENCE.

And this is what we will be learning
about in this class.

QUESTIONS?