

Thirsting *for* GOD

GARY L. THOMAS



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PART I

Soul Advancement: The Art *and* Discipline of Spiritual Training

I

The Journey of Faith: Knowing God More Intimately



With one simple sentence, Franklin Graham, president of Samaritan's Purse, instantly put me on the edge of my seat. "Maybe I should take Gary with me to see Daddy," he said. "We can work while we fly, have dinner with Daddy and Mama, and then work on the way back."

I could hardly believe my ears. *A personal dinner with Billy Graham!*

Billy Graham had no choice but to become one of the least accessible people in the world. *Everybody* wanted to meet the aging patriarch of evangelicalism, but Billy—despite his age and failing health—determined to preach until his strength literally gave out. If he spent 15 hours a day meeting people, he wouldn't have had the strength to preach. Being unavailable for personal appointments is much more realistic than laboriously filtering through the literally thousands of requests he receives. Those who love him dearly have been forced to become understandably protective.

And yet I was looking at the possibility of a private dinner! Of course, I'd have to make some adjustments in my schedule, and airlines seem to enjoy exploiting desperate travelers. "Oh, you need to change your day of departure? Sure, we can do that for a mere \$800 more."

You know what? I didn't care what it would cost me.

I would also have to cancel some appointments, but none of that mattered either. I thought I could look any of my friends in the eyes and say, "Hey, it was you or Billy Graham, and I went with Billy." They would have thought me foolish not to take advantage of the opportunity.

As it turned out, the dinner never took place. During the long journey

home, I reflected on how excited I'd been at the prospect of meeting this great man, how willing I was to undergo any difficulty to make it happen, and how quick I was to accept any discomfort the visit might bring to other areas of my life. All the while, every day, One who is infinitely greater than Billy Graham cries out, "Where is the man or woman who will devote himself or herself to be close to Me?"

The true cry of our hearts is to worship, know, and love the God who created us. But let's be honest. This relationship can, at first glance, seem incredibly difficult to enter into. How can we, encased in flesh and imprisoned in time, relate to a God who is spirit and eternal? How do we, with finite minds scarcely able to think above our sinful passions, commune with a God who is infinite in all His holy glory and in whose mind no sin has ever dwelled?

Surely no relationship has been less equal than the one Christ calls us to when He says, "Come, follow Me." Our occasional lack of wonder at the absolute inequality of the relationship is evidence enough that we do not fully comprehend the greatness of the God who speaks and the humility of us who listen.

This relationship calls us to the chief goal of humankind, "to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever," as the Westminster Shorter Catechism says. But this itself presents a problem. What does *enjoy God* mean? How do we relate to One we can't see, whose voice we cannot audibly hear?

For centuries, that has been the ultimate question of women and men whose hearts have burned with the passion of a pure and all-consuming love for their God. In many traditions, in many lands, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged and elderly people, and even children have heard the call of God and made their hearts receptacles of His grace. A.J. Russell wrote, "The story of every live church is the story of a continuous war for spirituality."¹

As I sought guidance for devoting myself to becoming close to God, I soon found that many contemporary writers on the spiritual life answer questions that are different from the ones I was asking. One writer seemed to be searching for relevance, another sought a collection of formulas and recipes for successful living, and others seemed mesmerized by spiritual experiences. All these pursuits seemed decidedly sterile compared with the journey I felt called to make—to devote myself to becoming close to God.

Then I opened a book that was written 1500 years ago, an Eastern

Christian classic by John Climacus called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. I felt as if something that had atrophied inside me was suddenly being nursed to life. I soon found myself meeting new friends, spiritual soul mates who were on the same search, like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, who joined forces in the sixteenth century to bring renewal to a stale religious order. I met the early eighteenth-century Anglican William Law and a brilliant seventeenth-century Puritan named John Owen, who gave some of the most practical advice for facing temptation I had ever read. Next, I met François Fénelon, a mystic whose writings to the French upper class in the eighteenth century are remarkably applicable to today's North American middle class. I met a wise spiritual director named Francis de Sales, who did something stunning for the seventeenth century—he directed his book on spirituality toward laypeople. His wisdom and practical advice for combining family life with spirituality was nothing short of astonishing. And then I met Henry Drummond, who helped me look at love and the will of God as I had never looked at either before.

Over time, as I read classic after classic, I began to realize some common themes. I went back to the classics I had read earlier and made notes in the margins, comparing their thoughts with the classics I read later. I was amazed that though the Anglican William Law had a radically different view of the nature of the church than did John Climacus, they agreed passionately and both had some very insightful things to say about the awareness of death being an aid to the Christian's spiritual life. Lorenzo Scupoli, who worked in the Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century, can often sound suspiciously like John Calvin, the brilliant innovator of the Reformed system of thought, when both talk about relating to God, growing in character, or cultivating the life of Christ in our souls.

So many of our theological discussions today highlight issues upon which we profoundly and often vehemently disagree. But as I met these writers throughout church history, I soon witnessed a beautiful tapestry of common truth that gave stunning witness to the accepted faith of the wider church—elements of the Christian life on which zealots and thoughtful adherents spoke in virtual unanimity.

I realized that though these saints were from different times, places, and Christian traditions, they agreed on so very much. They faced the same struggles and arrived at many of the same answers. They certainly weren't spouting simple formulas or ten easy steps. And their conclusions

never promised instant joy or earthly bliss. In fact, they often spoke of a spiritual desert or a dark night of the soul, and I knew, at a deep, instinctual level, that they were speaking the truth.

I would like to introduce you to some precious Christian brothers and sisters who have walked this life before us. I want to introduce you to their struggles and their insights, their victories and their defeats. Most of all, I want us to capture not only their wisdom and practical advice but also their passion for God. Though I'll tell some of their stories, I'll primarily focus on what they taught and discover the rich legacy of the classical Christian life.

Enemies or Friends?

Some may ask, why go back to the classics? Didn't some of these authors embrace traditions that are substantially different from what most evangelicals believe today?

Admittedly, quoting from these writers can be controversial. After I preached at one church, an earnest young man came up to me and said, "What you shared is so important for the church to hear; it was truly inspired. But why did you have to quote enemies of the gospel to make your point?"

I sighed. I had quoted Francis of Assisi and an Eastern Orthodox monk.

"Francis couldn't very well have been a Calvinist, now could he," I said, "because Calvin wasn't even born until Francis had been dead for almost 300 years. And though evangelicals certainly have disagreements with certain points of Eastern Orthodox theology, do you really want to simply and completely write off all the wisdom this wing of the church has gained over the past two millennia? The Orthodox claim to historicity is as strong as, if not stronger than, any other branch of the church!"

My final admonition was this: "Do you truly want to limit your reading to the 'three Johns'—Calvin, MacArthur, and Piper? I have enormous respect for each one of them, but I have gained so very much from reading widely. Different generations and different Christian perspectives have broadened my understanding of the journey of faith."

I believe we would be silly to avoid the classic devotional writings of Roman Catholics (many of whom wrote before the Reformation) or Eastern Orthodox Christians. This book does not split theological hairs. Rather, it examines the seasons, stages, and characteristics of the soul's

pursuit of God and response to Him, themes on which various Christian traditions enjoy wide agreement.

The Cry of Our Hearts

Some people may hesitate to read the Christian classics not only for sectarian reasons but also because they doubt that someone writing hundreds or thousands of years ago could have anything relevant to say to Christians today. Admittedly, the classic devotional writers probably couldn't have conceived of the 20,000 member megachurches we see today, with paved parking lots and parking attendants in orange vests. They may not have anticipated the football stadiums packed with seekers waiting to hear Billy Graham, satellites carrying Christian programming all over the world, or John Piper and Rick Warren sending out four or five inspirational tweets every day.

But has the human heart changed? Is jealousy any less destructive today than it was a thousand years ago? Does God's silence cause any fewer doubts in Christian souls today than it did in the Middle Ages?

Perhaps the faith of the saints is more relevant than much of what is being preached today. In our race for advances in technology, many of us may be losing touch with the individual human soul and the transcendent God who made us. Some of these precious saints of ages past knew the ache of humanity and the glory of God like few since. They discovered the fundamental issues of life and had an amazing capacity to see through all the trappings that confuse so many of us today.

We can read all the bookstores' volumes on emotional wholeness, marital and family relationships, financial responsibility, and other pressing issues, and well we should, but every book worth reading recites one familiar refrain: The foundational issue is our relationship to God. If we center our life on Him, every other area will fall into place as well. The men and women who wrote the Christian classics were masters at understanding the spiritual life. We may not accept every single doctrine they teach, but perhaps we can recognize the love of God in them, learn how that love was kindled, and see how they learned to enjoy God.

They taught basic Christian spirituality. Unfortunately, the whole notion of spirituality is becoming problematic today, and the noble pursuit of it can lead us down the wrong path if we're not careful. Therefore, let's spend just a few moments defining Christian spirituality.