

... obeyed the law fully for us (2 Cor 5:21), so now it is a delight to us, not an everlasting despair.

Jesus is supremely the one also on whom we meditate, because he *is* the meditation of God. He is God's truth become "real," made concrete, and applied. He is the one who enables us to stand in the Judgment Day. He is the one who gives us the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22ff). We must both meditate on him and with him, and then, not only will Psalm 1 come to life in new ways, but we will become unshakable trees, as he was. Richard Lovelace wrote:

It is an item of faith that we are children of God; there is plenty of experience in us against it. The faith that surmounts this evidence and that is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness. . . . We are not saved by the love we exercise, but by the love we trust.²⁷⁵

When Lovelace speaks of warming oneself "at the fire of God's love," he is describing what it means to meditate on the righteousness we have in Christ through his sacrificial death. If we don't meditate on that until our hearts are hot with assurance, we will "steal love and self-acceptance" from worldly achievements, beauty, and status.

Meditate on Jesus, who is the ultimate meditation of God. Look at him loving you. Look at him dying for you. Look at him rejoicing in you. Look at him singing over you (Zeph 3:17). Look at all that, and he will be a delight to you, and then the law will be a delight to you, and you will be like a tree planted by streams of water. You'll bear your fruit in season, and no matter what will happen, your leaf will not wither.

ELEVEN

As Encounter: Seeking His Face

Prayer is a conversation that leads to encounter with God. As we have seen, the Westminster Larger Catechism acknowledges that this "working and quickening in our hearts" does not take place "in all persons, nor at all times, in the same measure."²⁷⁶ Nevertheless, that is our goal. In John Owen's treatment of meditation, the third stage anticipates a character-forming experience of God's presence and reality.

John Calvin argues that Jesus' gifts for his people are not experienced by so many of them. That enjoyment, he says, can happen only through "communion with Christ" and "the secret energy of the Holy Spirit, by which we come to enjoy all his benefits."²⁷⁷ Later he adds: "For the Word of God is not received by faith as if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart."²⁷⁸ We must not settle for an informed mind without an engaged heart.

All this leads naturally to ask: What kind of experience should be expected and how should it be sought?

Calvin's idea—that we have blessings in Christ we don't experience—is expressed also in the great prayer by Paul in Ephesians 3.

I kneel before the Father. . . . I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:14, 16–19)

Paul prays for his readers “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (v. 17) and that they would “know this love” of Christ (vv. 18–19). Finally, he prays that they would be filled with “all the fullness of God” (v. 19). Those are Paul's three main petitions.²⁷⁹

These Ephesian readers, however, were all Christian believers, and Paul teaches elsewhere that if you don't have the Spirit and Christ resident in your life, you are not a Christian at all. In Ephesians 2, Paul goes on at length about how all his readers have been united with Christ and united with others who have Christ in them. In Ephesians 1, he teaches that by being united with Christ, they *already* have the fullness of God in them (Eph 1:22–23). All this leads us to ask: Isn't Christ already living in Christians? Don't they already know his great sacrificial love? How can anyone be a Christian otherwise? Why is he asking God to give Christians things they must surely already have?

There can be only one answer. At one level, Christians have these

things. At another level, they haven't experienced them.²⁸⁰ It is one thing to know of the love of Christ and to say, “I know he did all that.” It is another thing to *grasp* how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. What Paul is talking about is the difference between having something be true of you in principle and fully appropriating it, using it, and living in it—in your “inner being” (Eph 3:16) or “in your heart” (v. 17).

It is possible for Christians to live their lives with a high degree of phoniness, hollowness, and inauthenticity. The reason is because they have failed to move that truth into their hearts and therefore it has not actually changed who they are and how they live.

Blaise Pascal was a Christian believer and philosopher, and one of the great minds of history. When he died it was discovered that he had sewn into the inner lining of his coat the description of an experience he had had one night. It read: “In the year 1654, Monday, twenty-third November, from about half past ten in the evening until half an hour after midnight . . . FIRE . . . God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, and not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certainty. Certainty. Feeling. Joy. Peace.” Pascal was not talking about a sight of literal flames but of an experience of the presence of God—what fire in the Bible so often represents. He had believed in God, but when he said he had met the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—not the “God of the philosophers”—he meant he now knew in the heart what he had known in the abstract.²⁸¹ Another, less famous example is Dwight L. Moody, a prominent Chicago minister and evangelist in the late nineteenth century. He wrote: “One day in the city of New York—oh what a day!—I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name. . . . I can only say that God revealed himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand.”²⁸² It wasn't that Moody was not a Christian

or that he had never known Christ's love and presence. Perhaps we could say that the objective reality of who he was in Christ and the inward subjective experience came together. For a moment he lived as the person he actually was.

These are well-known cases of unusually intense spiritual encounters. But don't write them off too quickly as exceptional. Paul would not be praying something for each of his Ephesian readers to have a nearly unattainably high, rare occurrence. In Ephesians 3, he is praying that by the Spirit's power we may have our hearts and affections engaged and shaped by the truths of the faith we hold in the mind. Such a sense of the heart can come in many degrees, from a mild and gentle warming to an explosive epiphany. It does not have to be an experience we write down and think about the rest of our lives, though such gifts are welcome. What *is* common to all these moments is that you sense the power of what you have been given in Christ so that your attitudes, feelings, and behavior are altered. Imagine you get a notice that someone left you some money, but for various reasons, you assume it is a very modest amount. You get busy and don't get around even to checking on it for quite a while. Finally, you do so and are thunderstruck to discover it was a fortune, and you had not been doing anything with it. You were actually rich but had been living poor. This is what Paul wants his Christian friends to avoid, and only through encounter with God in prayer can they avoid it.

This may be where you are. You are in him. You are adopted into the Father's family. You have the very divine life in you, the Holy Spirit. You are loved and accepted in Christ. You know about these things, and yet at another level you don't know them, you don't grasp them. You are still dogged by your bad habits, often anxious or bored or discouraged or angry. You may have many specific problems and issues that need to be faced and dealt with through various specific

means. Yet the root problem of them all is that you are rich in Christ but nevertheless living poor.

"The Truth Begins to Shine"

What does it mean to speak of spiritual experience in the inner being? What is the "inner being"? It is the same thing as the heart, the center of both our personal consciousness and our most fundamental faith commitments.²⁸³ This is where the truths we know about Jesus with our mind can fail to register. We may mentally assent to the idea of Jesus' love for us, yet our hearts are committed to finding love through popular acclaim. In such a case the inner being has not been affected by what the mind believes. The Spirit must prepare it to be reshaped and formed by the truth. How does that happen?

The Spirit creates an inner spiritual sensitivity to gospel truth. Paul says, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that . . . [you may] grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." This word *grasp* is important—it is more than just to "believe." It means to get a secure hold on something.

Photography used to require film that was made sensitive to light by treating it with chemicals. The camera shutter opened and in came light, bouncing off an object such as a tree. The chemically treated film "grasped" the image of the tree, and there the image remained. The film was permanently impressed with and changed by the tree. Imagine, however, that there is some failure to put the film through the proper chemical treatment. Then the shutter opens and the light comes in, but the film isn't sufficiently sensitive to receive a clear image, if any image at all. The light makes no difference to the film whatsoever.

Paul's prayer suggests that Christians need the Spirit's "chemical treatment," a spiritual sensitizing, or the truths we mouth and assent to will make no real difference in how we live. If you are exposed to the "light" of the Christian truth that God is holy, and if the Holy Spirit has sensitized your heart, then you not only respond with emotion—with tears or trembling or joy—but you permanently change the way you live and behave in the world. When your feelings and behaviors are affected, you have, to a degree, *grasped* a particular truth about God. The light comes in and makes permanent impressions.

No one has expressed this better than Jonathan Edwards in his great sermon "A Divine and Supernatural Light." At the heart of the sermon is his famous illustration of honey. There are two ways to know that honey is sweet, he says. You can know it with the rational mind, and you can also know it with the sensing tongue. You can know that honey is sweet because people tell you about it and you believe them, but when you actually taste the sweetness of honey yourself, you know fully—mentally as well as experientially.

When you move from just mentally knowing about the sweetness of honey to directly tasting it, you may say something like this: "I knew it was sweet, but I really didn't realize what that meant. *I knew but I didn't know.*" Edwards concludes that, in the same way, "there is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and graciousness on the heart."

You may say, "I really believe in God, I really believe that Jesus died on the cross. I have no doubts about that." Edwards can respond that you may not have had any doubts at all about honey being sweet either. You could have talked to a hundred people who told you it was. You could have read scientific reports that proved it was sweet and

pleasant to the human palate. You could have been quite sure about it without having tasted it yourself.

Honey is one thing, however, and God is quite another. Knowing God is not optional, and this is what Paul is praying for. He asks that the Holy Spirit will sensitize our hearts so that we taste these truths, spiritually speaking, or—as he says in Ephesians 1:18, when he prays that "the eyes of your heart may be enlightened"—that we see them, spiritually speaking. When the Spirit is doing his work, the truths of the Word and gospel lift us up, move us, strike us, maybe melt and compel us. That is what happens to us instead of our saying, "Okay, I know all that." There's an old hymn that uses this kind of sensory language:

When once Thou visitest the heart,
Then truth begins to shine,
Then earthly vanities depart,
Then kindles love divine.²⁸⁴

Knowing the Father

There is another phrase in Paul's prayer that helps us understand the nature of spiritual experience. Paul begins by saying that he "kneels before the Father" (Eph 3:14). To kneel was not the normal prayer posture for Christians and Jews, and so to "bow the knee" was an act of special reverence.²⁸⁵ Paul may be taking particular notice of the fact that God is, indeed, now our *Father*. In Romans 8, Paul calls the Spirit who helps us to pray the "spirit of sonship," who leads us to pray "*Abba, Father*" (v. 15). He goes on to say that the heart of the Spirit's ministry to us is to "testify with our spirit"—to assure us inwardly—

“that we are God’s children” (v. 8:16). So another aspect of communion with God is a deeper understanding and the appropriation of our family relationship with the Father.

When the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus at his baptism, he hears a voice say, “This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased. You are my Son, and I delight in you.” In the same way, Romans 8:16 tells us that the Spirit bears witness to our hearts that we are children of God. Part of the mission of the Spirit is to tell you about God’s love for you, his delight in you, and the fact that you are his child. These things you may know in your head, but the Holy Spirit makes them a fiery reality in your life.

Thomas Goodwin, a seventeenth-century Puritan pastor, wrote that one day he saw a father and son walking along the street. Suddenly the father swept the son up into his arms and hugged him and kissed him and told the boy he loved him—and then after a minute he put the boy back down. Was the little boy more a son in the father’s arms than he was down on the street? Objectively and legally, there was no difference, but subjectively and experientially, there was all the difference in the world. In his father’s arms, the boy was *experiencing* his sonship.

When the Holy Spirit comes down on you in fullness, you can sense your Father’s arms beneath you. It is an assurance of who you are. The Spirit enables you to say to yourself: “If someone as all-powerful as that loves me like this, delights in me, has gone to infinite lengths to save me, says he will never let me go, and is going to glorify me and make me perfect and take everything bad out of my life—if all of that is true—why am I worried about anything?” At a minimum this means joy, and a lack of fear and self-consciousness.

In Ephesians 5:18, Paul says, “Don’t be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit.” Remember the disciples on Pentecost. They

went out and spoke the gospel in public with such a wonderful lack of self-consciousness that some thought they had had too much to drink (Acts 2:13). But their boldness was unlike being drunk in the most important respect. Alcohol is a depressant—it deadens parts of the rational brain. The happiness you may feel when you are drunk comes because you are less aware of reality. The Spirit, however, gives you joyful fearlessness by making you *more* aware of reality. It assures you that you are a child of the only One whose opinion and power matters. He loves you to the stars and will never let you go.

Grasping the Love

Paul asks the Holy Spirit to give “power to grasp.” The word *grasp* means “to wrestle” or it could mean “to capture,” as in capturing a city in battle. It means to jump on somebody, overpower him, wrestle him to the ground, and knock him out. At first it seems a very strange word to use when talking about the love of God, but Paul is talking about meditating and pondering something until you break through, until, as we say, it “hits” you. The breakthrough will happen, of course, only with the Spirit’s empowering help.

How does that happen? It is through the Spirit’s blessing of our meditation on the saving work of Jesus. I believe that in Ephesians 3 we are given a case study of this. Why does Paul spell it out, calling us to consider the width and breadth and depth and height of Christ’s love? He is proposing a way to meditate and inviting us to do it. Let’s take up his invitation.

How *wide* is the love of God? Think of Isaiah 1:18: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” Scarlet is the color of blood. This was God’s way of saying through Isaiah, “Even if you

have killed somebody, even if you have blood-guilt, blood on your hands, my love is wide enough to enfold and embrace you. It doesn't matter who you are or what you have done. It doesn't matter if you *have* killed people. If Jesus Christ died on the cross so that you are saved by *grace* alone, then my love is infinitely wide. It is wide enough for you."

How *long* is the love of God? Jesus says in John 10, "I know my own. I give them eternal life . . . and no one can pluck them out of my hand." In Philippians 1:6, Paul says to the Christians, everybody he is writing to at Philippi, "I am convinced . . . that he who began a good work in you *will* carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Not "may." *Will*. His love is infinitely long. And when did his love begin? We are told in the book of Revelation that the Lamb of God was slain before the foundation of the world. God put his love on you in the depths of time, and he will never remove it from you. Why? Because salvation is by grace. It is not by works. It is not given to you because of what you do. It has begun in the depths of time and will last into eternity. It is infinitely long.

The reason that the love of God in Christ is infinitely wide and infinitely long is because it is infinitely *deep*. How *deep* is the love of God? Without Jesus Christ, talk about the "depth of God's love" would be simply an abstraction. Without Jesus Christ, God could send you sixty volumes, with every page saying, "I love you deeply, I love you deeply, I love you deeply," but it would still be an abstract concept, not a life-changing reality. To genuinely understand the depths of God's love you must know the depths to which Jesus Christ went in order to love *you*. How deep did he go? "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" That is hell. He was thrown into the deepest pit anybody ever went into, and he went in voluntarily. He went down and down and down—to *the depths*. Because of the gospel, you can

know that God's love is infinitely wide and infinitely long because it was infinitely deep.

God's love is also infinitely *high*. What is the *height* of God's love? In John 17, Jesus says, "Father, [about us] I want them to have the glory we have had before the creation of the world." In 1 John 3:2, it says, "Beloved, we do not know what we will be like. But we know we will be like him, because when we see him, we will see him as he is." That is the height of God's love. He is going to give us the same thing that fills his heart with infallible joy from all eternity. He is going to show us his glory, and he is going to give us that glory.

Can you think of anything higher than that? That is where Jesus' love is taking us.

What have we just done? We just did a brief meditation. We meditated on the dimensions of Christ's love. If, as we do that, the Spirit gives us some power to grasp it, we will encounter God. That will change the way we see all of life and how we behave in this world. Spiritual experience consists of luminous truth and profound assurance of God's fatherly love.

Yet there is another way to speak of it.

The Face of Christ

David says, "Your face will I seek" (Ps 27:8). God is, of course, omnipresent—he is everywhere (Ps 139:7–12). What does it mean, then, to seek his face and to "draw near" if he is everywhere already? When we speak to someone, we don't look at and address his or her kneecaps or feet or back or stomach. We address the person to his or her face. The face is the "relational gate" into a person's mind and heart. To seek God's face is not to find some place in space where God

is located. Rather, it is to have our hearts enabled by the Holy Spirit to sense his reality and presence. “The Lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain” (Deut 5:4; cf. Gen 32:30; Num 6:25–26). People are called by God to “pray and seek my face” (2 Chron 7:14). To lose a sense of God’s presence is to lose God’s face (Ps 13:1), and to seek his face is to seek communion with him, a real interaction with God, sharing thoughts and love.

In the Old Testament, however, we are told that no one can see God’s face and live (Ex 33:20). Despite this, the beginning of John’s gospel tells us that Jesus, the Word of God, became flesh and “we beheld his glory” (John 1:14). Because of his shed blood and forgiveness, we can have a nearness to God that was not possible before. Jesus’ person and work is the breakthrough for any who want to draw near and seek God’s face.

John Owen gave great attention to 2 Corinthians 3:18—“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”—in connection with 2 Corinthians 4:6, where Paul says that God has given us “the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.” Throughout Owen’s writing, he returns continually to the subject of what has been called the beatific vision. The term describes the direct sight of the glory of God. This is what the redeemed will have in heaven fully, by sight, and what believers have now on earth partially, by faith and not yet with our literal eyes. While Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas made this the centerpiece of his thought, very few Protestant theologians have touched on it at all. Yet Owen “is doggedly insistent that meditating upon the beatific vision is a vital practice for all Christians to cultivate,” because “our Christian life and thinking should be oriented toward the hope of

the beatific vision, and shaped by the foretaste we receive of it here and now.”²⁸⁶

Owen did not understand “beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” to be either an esoteric subject or something only for certain highly spiritual kinds of people. With great force he argued that no one “will ever behold the glory of Christ by *sight* hereafter who doth not in some measure behold it by *faith* here in this world.”²⁸⁷ This raises the stakes on prayer and meditation to high levels. Owen held that, unless you learn how to behold the glory of Christ, you are not actually living a truly Christian life in this world.

What does “beholding” Christ’s glory mean, according to Owen? It is important that “we rest not in the notion of this truth [of Christ’s glory as] . . . a bare assent of the doctrine of it.” He rightly observed that, when Paul spoke of *beholding* Christ’s glory, he could not be talking of mere belief that Jesus was glorious. Rather, “the affecting power of it upon our hearts is that which we should aim at. . . . Doth it not fill and satiate . . . with joy, rest, delight . . . and ineffable satisfaction? . . . It is our present view of the glory of Christ which is our initiation thereunto, if we are exercised in it, until we have an experience of its transforming power in our souls.”²⁸⁸

To behold the glory of Jesus means that we begin to find Christ beautiful for who he is in himself. It means a kind of prayer in which we are not simply coming to him to get his forgiveness, his help for our needs, his favor and blessing. Rather, the consideration of his character, words, and work on our behalf becomes inherently satisfying, enjoyable, comforting, and strengthening.²⁸⁹ Owen insisted that it was crucial that Christians be enabled to do this. He reasoned that if the beauty and glory of Christ do not capture our imaginations, dominate our waking thought, and fill our hearts with longing and desire—then something else will. We will be “continually ruminating”

on *something* or some things as our hope and joy. Whatever those things are, they will “frame our souls” and “transform us into their likeness.” If we don’t behold the glory of God in the face of Christ, then something else will rule our lives. We will be slaves.²⁹⁰

Some years ago I spoke to a man who had gone to church all his life, but he was nevertheless a particularly fearful and anxious person. Under especially clear gospel preaching, however, he came to see that all his life he had basically been a moralist, assuming God would hear his prayers and save him because of his decency and ethical life and inner sincerity. In this view of things, God was someone with whom he had to negotiate in order to get the kind of life he wanted. Then through the gospel he realized the scope and depth of his self-centeredness, spiritual willfulness, and sin. He came to see that it was impossible to overcome this in God’s eyes with his spotty record of good works. He also realized how unmerited God’s love for him was, and how much this grace cost Jesus on the cross. For the first time in his life—he began to be attracted to this God. He gradually began to find his joy *in* God. Prayer became not just a time of going through his list of requests but also a time of adoration, confession, and simply enjoying God.

As God became more and more his heart’s joy, he began to find himself becoming less anxious, more courageous. “In the past, it seemed so saccharine and unreal to say ‘God is my treasure.’ But now that he actually is becoming that to me—I just can’t worry as much about money as I used to.”

The choice is ours. If we want to be sure to experience this vision by sight hereafter, we must know it by faith now. If we want freedom from being driven by fear, ambition, greed, lust, addictions, and inner emptiness, we must learn how to meditate on Christ until his glory breaks in upon our souls.

John Owen’s balance is striking.²⁹¹ He is unabashedly experiential. The term he uses for this is to be “spiritually minded.” He writes: “Let us not mistake ourselves. To be spiritually minded is not to have the notion and knowledge of spiritual things in our minds; it is not to be constant, no, nor to abound, in the performance of duties: both which may be when there is no grace in the heart at all.” That is, you can have all the sound doctrine possible and be fastidiously performing your ethical and religious duties according to biblical principles and have “no grace in the heart at all.” What is the essence of real Christianity? He adds immediately: “It is to have our minds really exercised with delight about heavenly things, the things that are above, especially Christ himself as at the right hand of God.”²⁹² Owen promotes what could be called a radically biblical mysticism. It comes through meditation on Scripture, on theological truth, on the gospel—but it must break through to real experience of God.

Because of his concern to keep spiritual experience tied to the Scripture, Owen was wary of the tradition of mysticism that developed in the medieval church. In his only book on prayer, Owen devotes a full chapter to assessing the Catholic contemplative tradition. He begins with a startling statement of the importance of encounter with God:

The spiritual intense fixation of the mind, by contemplation on God in Christ, until the soul be as it were swallowed up in admiration and delight, and being brought unto an utter loss, through the infiniteness of those excellencies which it doth admire and adore . . . are things to be aimed at in prayer, and which, through the riches of divine condescension, are frequently enjoyed.²⁹³

Here is a writer who is not afraid of spiritual experience. Indeed, as we have seen, he teaches that regular delight in God and experiences of sweetness and love are the only ways to avoid being dominated at a practical level by false gods and enslaving passions and drives. Yet he is critical of the Catholic tradition because the Bible is not sufficiently emphasized as the main material for meditation and contemplation.

At one point Owen lays down a principle about the relationship of truth to experience. He writes: "Where light leaves the affections behind, it ends in formality and or atheism; where affections outrun light they sink into the bog of superstition, doting on images and pictures or the like."²⁹⁴

By "light" Owen means our knowledge of right teaching or doctrine. Our doctrinal and biblical knowledge cannot "leave the affections behind." If we believe with our minds that God is holy, we must also come to find his holiness enjoyable and satisfying just to praise it. If we believe the great God of the universe really loves us, it should make us emotionally unshakable in the face of criticism, suffering, and death. In short, we must be able to existentially *access* our doctrinal convictions. If doctrinal soundness is not accompanied by heart experience, it will lead eventually to nominal Christianity—that is, in name only—and eventually to nonbelief. The irony is that many conservative Christians, most concerned about conserving true and sound doctrine, neglect the importance of prayer and make no effort to experience God, and this can lead to the eventual loss of sound doctrine. Owen believes that Christianity without real experience of God will eventually be no Christianity at all.

Still, there is a danger in the other direction. "Affections can outrun light," which leads us not to unbelief but to "superstition, doting on images and pictures or the like." Here, Owen particularly has in mind

many elements of the medieval church's mystical tradition. It is possible to use techniques of meditation and imagination to create changes in consciousness that are not tied at all to the reality of who God is. For example, it can be an extraordinarily powerful experience to vividly imagine Jesus walking into your room and speaking words of affirmation and assurance to you. Or you can imagine him coming into some past incident in your life, intervening, defending you, and embracing you. In such an exercise it would be easy to put words in Jesus' mouth that directly contradict his teaching in the Bible. Or, as we have seen, repeated words and phrases can bring about changes in consciousness, and trancelike states.

In Owen's chapter on Roman Catholic contemplative prayer, he lists many criticisms. He charges that the experience of perfect peace and calm, utterly undisturbed by feelings of either anger or desire, comes from the Neoplatonic philosophers like Plotinus. But Jesus prayed with vehement cries (Heb 5:7). The love of God does not extinguish desire but fulfills it. Owen argues that wordless prayer, while sometimes occurring, is never prescribed or seen as an ideal. In Luke 11, Jesus told his disciples to use words. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul urged Christians to "pray with the mind" in words.

Another problem for Owen is that emphasis on ascetic techniques—which are conceived as rungs in a ladder from purgative, lower forms of prayer (such as petition and confession) to higher forms—can obscure the truth of God's grace. Prayer becomes a regimen by which one prepares oneself to be worthy of the vision. It also becomes elitist, something only monastics and others can do because it requires hours a day and complicated techniques. Last, Owen argues that in much mystical prayer there is a loss of orientation to the centrality of Christ's mediation between us and the Father. Much of the language of the medieval tradition talks about direct experience of God in his essence.

This tends to leave to one side the gospel and his saving work. For Owen, that is deadly. It means the experiences people are having are psychological. They are not contacting the real God, who reveals himself personally only through Christ.²⁹⁵

Nevertheless, despite his deep concerns, in the end Owen concludes: “It is better that our affections exceed our light from the defect of our understandings, than that our light exceed our affections from the corruption of our wills.”²⁹⁶ That’s a remarkable thing for a Puritan to say. If we are going to be imbalanced, better that we be doctrinally weak and have a vital prayer life and a real sense of God on the heart than that we get all our doctrine straight and be cold and spiritually hard. In his treatise *Spiritual-Mindedness*, there is a passage speaking to this concept that is worth quoting at some length:

In your thoughts of Christ, be very careful that they are conceived and directed according to *the rule of the word*, lest you deceive your own souls, and give up the conduct of your affections unto vain imaginations. . . . [But] we are not to forego our duty [to contemplate Christ] because other men have been mistaken in theirs, nor part with practical, fundamental principles of religion because they have been abused by superstition. . . . Yet I must say that I had rather be among them who, in the actings of their love and affection unto Christ, do fall into some irregularities and excesses in the manner of expressing it . . . than among those who, professing themselves to be Christians, do almost disavow their having any thoughts of or affection unto the person of Christ.²⁹⁷

Modern Roman Catholic writers like Hans Urs von Balthasar have acknowledged the difficulty of holding the “exterior Word” of the

Bible together with the “interior, indwelling Word” of the Spirit.²⁹⁸ Von Balthasar concedes that the Catholic mystical tradition tends to rely too much on the inward, passing very quickly into a tranquil beholding, while Protestants are better at studying the Scripture in order to hear God, and then to wrestle with and respond to him. He counters, however, that Protestants, for their part, have too weak an understanding of the indwelling Spirit to lead them to profound experience. He thinks they settle for mere doctrinal knowledge.²⁹⁹ As we have seen, it is true that many Protestants are hesitant about spiritual experience. Nevertheless, the best Protestant theologies of the Holy Spirit are more than adequate for the task, as Owen’s massive treatises and robust spiritual theology attest.

Cautions and Appreciation

John Owen’s critique of what he considers unbiblical mysticism goes hand in hand with appreciation for those who intensely desire—as the medieval mystics did—to be swallowed up by the glory of God. Owen did not shrink from saying that we *should* desire a “contemplation on God in Christ, until the soul be as it were swallowed up in admiration and delight.” Yet his criticism is sharp of those who do not ground this contemplation in the Word and in the gospel of grace.

I believe Owen could have been more generous in granting at points the similarity of his own descriptions of spiritual experience with many of the descriptions by the mystics. Yet on the whole Owen is correct and strikes the rare and right balance, even preferring—slightly!—engaged affections over sound doctrine.

With this in mind, I think Protestants who find the biblical mysticism of a John Owen or a Jonathan Edwards appealing should read

the medieval mystics with appreciation but also plenty of caution.³⁰⁰ In the article “Why Should Thoughtful Evangelicals Read the Christian Mystics?” church historian Carl Trueman points out that medieval Catholic spirituality embraces what he (and I) consider a massive error—the belief that Jesus is resacrificed in the Mass and thus our pardon from sin was not completely “finished” nor our future glory guaranteed by Christ’s death on the cross. This leads to many of the distortions in medieval mysticism that Owen points out: the idea that you can purge and qualify yourself for higher experiences, the strong impression that you can connect to God directly, and a general lack of use of the gospel itself in prayer.

Nevertheless, Trueman says of the medieval mystics, “There is a sense of God’s holiness and transcendence in these works that is significantly absent from much modern writing and thinking about God. . . . What makes them mystics is their sensitivity to their very smallness and insignificance before the vastness of God who, in himself, is unknowable and who has chosen to reveal himself in the fragile forms of human words and human flesh. If the theology often leaves much to be desired, it would seem that the answer is not to reject the ambition of the mystics but to combine this ambition with appropriate theology.”³⁰¹

In the Garden of Eden, we sinned and lost the face of God. This was the greatest disaster possible, because we were designed to live in the unique, perfect, marvelous light of his countenance. We have wandered empty and destitute. Moses realized that, in the beatific vision of the face of God, all his longings would be fulfilled. He asked to see it—but his sin was a barrier. In Jesus that barrier is taken away and we can begin to see, though only partially and by faith, the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ. When we meditate and pray the gospel and its attendant truths into our hearts with the power of

the Spirit, those longings are slowly satisfied, and other things in life become gifts rather than gods, and we slowly but surely and radically change in our character and in all our relationships. Augustine expressed it perfectly in the *Confessions*. He realized that all the things he loved were in God, the headwater of all streams of desire:

But what do I love when I love you? Not the beauty of any body or the rhythm of time in its movement; not the radiance of light, so dear to our eyes; not the sweet melodies in the world of manifold sounds; not the perfume of flowers, ointments and spices; not manna and not honey; not the limbs so delightful to the body’s embrace: it is none of these things that I love when I love my God.

And yet when I love my God I do indeed love a light and a sound and a perfume and a food and an embrace—a light and sound and perfume and food and embrace in my inward self. There my soul is flooded with a radiance which no space can contain; there a music sounds which time never bears away; there I smell a perfume which no wind disperses; there I taste a food that no surfeit embitters; there is an embrace which no satiety severs. It is this that I love when I love my God. (*Confessions* 10.6.8)