

The Pursuit of God

Shirley Madany

This is our first “Library Coffee” and we hope to have more of them in the future. When I was asked to start it off with some kind of a book review I immediately began to think – what book? This devotional book entitled “The Pursuit of God” by Rev. A. W. Tozer seemed to be ideal and I decided to concentrate on it and touch on some other books in a more general way.

The pursuit of God has to be personal. So I want to talk about the subject of “pursuit” as well as the book itself. There are many books in our library here to which I am indebted for the measure in which they have rewarded this pursuit.

We have many similar devotional type books and selections of sermons – any one of which might become your own favorite. I am only using this book because I can speak from experience about it.

Somewhere in high school I had to memorize part of a large poem on the ancient traveler Ulysses by Tennyson. Some of the lines I have never forgotten because they appealed to me tremendously:

I am a part of all that I have met,
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little.

At first this poem just meant to me travel and meeting people and the adventure of living itself. “[A]ll experience” – how that phrase fascinated me. I used to actually get into a mood when I figured out that I couldn't possibly meet all the people in the world even at the rate of one per minute! This was before I became aware of what it meant to be a Christian. Then was added zest to seek those experiences which would enrich ones' spiritual life – for truly – we are a part of all that we have met. We are bound by the limits of time now but just think what lies ahead for us in eternity when we will have time for everything.

Rev. A. W. Tozer is the writer of “The Pursuit of God”. Perhaps some of you have heard of him for he was quite well known in Chicago. The preface is also written by someone of interest to our circles – the late Dr. Samuel Zwemer – a great missionary to the Arabs.

This is not one of the latest or newest books on our shelves but we do have several copies of it and of course its contents are timeless for its subject is one which has concerned the people of God always. I have been surprised at just how much it must have influenced me whenever I reread it with a gap of several years in between. A favorite book is like a friend and can even serve that exact purpose.

So far I have referred to this as a “devotional” book. Perhaps it could be better described as a Christian’s activity handbook. The title indicates the whole thrust of each page – and certainly “pursuit” is something very active. As Tozer says in his first chapter, entitled “Following Hard After God”:

“The impulse to pursue God originates with God but the outworking of that impulse is our following hard after Him; and all the time we are pursuing Him we are already in His hand.”

The writer’s whole concern is to make God known to us as a person. He feels that too often we hold our faith in an impersonal way, forgetting that God makes himself known to us through the avenue of our minds, our wills and our emotions. He says:

“You and I are in little (our sins excepted) what God is in large. Being made in His image we have within us the capacity to know Him. In our sins we lack only the power. The moment the Spirit has quickened us to life in regeneration our whole being senses its kinship to God and leaps up in joyous recognition. That is the heavenly birth without which we cannot see the Kingdom of God. It is, however, not an end but an inception, for nor begins the glorious pursuit, the heart’s happy exploration of the infinite riches of the Godhead. That is where we begin, I say, but where we stop no man has yet discovered, for there is in the awful and mysterious depths of the Triune God neither limit nor end.”

Isn’t this exciting? Here is something you and I can do no matter who we are. Here is a never ending adventure. Quoting again:

“To have found God and still to pursue Him is the soul’s paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too-easily-satisfied religionist but justified in happy experience by the children of the burning heart.”

He suggests that we should come near to the holy men and women of the past. How are we to do that? By reading books? Yes, talented men and women have written, sometimes in story form, in such a way that we can appreciate better the saints who have gone before us.

The writer wants to encourage a mighty longing in our souls (a deeply personal faith). Every time that I have picked up this book – even to read just one chapter – I have felt a great surge of love for God. It feels like something burning within oneself. Glimpses of the person we love should be like that.

The second chapter has the title “The Blessedness of Possessing Nothing”. In it he speaks of the testing we may have if we set out in pursuit of God. God may try us as he did Abraham to see if we are ready to give up all our possessions for His sake. He knows how even one treasured possession can stand in the way. This is God’s way of giving us deeper joy, for once we have discovered “the blessedness of possessing nothing”, then we cease to be anxious over our earthly

possessions, whether they are loved ones or things, the strength is taken out of those troublesome words “my” and “mine”.

This chapter has meant much to me for it fitted in with a great desire which I had to obey that command “thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart, all thy soul, and all thy mind.” It just seemed that there was a conflict there unless and until one could truly say that love for God preceded love even for one’s husband. I am confident that God in his great wisdom knew that herein lay the secret of the greatest happiness. That we must love the “giver” before the “gift”.

Now dare we come actually into the presence of God? Dare we “remove the veil”? Tozer feels that often we are prevented from coming into His presence because of veils which cover our hearts. Specifically he calls them the self-sins such as self-righteousness, self-pity, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, etc. What dreadful trouble it is when one is occupied with oneself. We cannot remove these veils ourselves but we can ask for their removal.

In this chapter he quotes the rapturous words written by Frederick Faber:

“Only to sit and think of God,
Oh what a joy it is!
To think the thought, to breathe the Name;
Earth has no higher bliss.
Father of Jesus, love’s reward!
What rapture will it be,
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,
And gaze and gaze on Thee!”

What a depth experience would be necessary to compose such lines! Maybe we don’t dare enough. “The possibility of intimate acquaintance with God has not entered our minds.” Many people just don’t think of God being knowable in the same sense that you know of things or people. And yet there are countless verses in the Bible which could tell us otherwise.

Living in this very secular age “the visible becomes the enemy of the invisible; the temporal, of the eternal.” Here is a promise “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” And has your heart not thrilled to that promise which is so often sung by choirs – “If with all your heart ye truly seek Me, ye shall ever surely find Me.”

Receptivity is a gift of God which must be recognized and cultivated.

As you can tell already – there is no end of beautiful passages in this book. I will only mention a few more and then leave the rest to you. He talks about faith being the gaze of the soul upon a saving God – drawing this from the Gospel of John when our Lord reminded his hearers of the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness.

Here is a beautiful thought. “When the eyes of the soul looking out meet the eyes of God looking in, heaven has begun right here on this earth.” Also “[t]he whole Church of God gains

when the members that compose it begin to seek a better and a higher life.” What a way to show our gratitude!

This little book is a challenge for it was not meant to be read and then put back on the shelf. The last chapter, I think, is especially helpful for women. It is called “The Sacrament of Living”. Each chapter has its text and this one is “whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” What wonderful commands we are given to carry out with Jesus’ help. Name any task which you find irksome – just think – you can turn it into a pleasure by doing it for the Lord – for the glory of God. He talks about the trouble which we give ourselves when we divide the world into sacred and secular. “It is not *what* a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular, it is *why* he does it. Our entire life can be a priestly ministration!”

At first I thought of relating each chapter to some specific book in the library to show how it had fitted into this active pursuit. That turned out to be too gigantic for a coffee hour so I decided to give you a good taste of “The Pursuit of God” and then just mention a few of the books which I have found helpful. Again I should mention that these are only examples and that because of the different gifts which are given us – you might have made an entirely different selection.

Starting with the section we call “religion” I would single out Martyn Lloyd Jones’ two volumes on the Sermon on the Mount. The use of commentaries and a Bible dictionary in following up certain subjects has often led to vision of God.

To experience the fellowship of the saints down through the ages there are many gems in our biography section. Here we have various lives of saints, many written in the form of biographical fiction – written in such a way that we thrill to the evidence of the hand of God as He works in the lives of his followers. To name just three which cover many centuries – there is one on Augustine, called “Son of Tears”, one on the wife of John Calvin, called “Idelette”, and one on the hymn writer John Newton, called “Servant of Slaves”.

I was thrilled with the life of Augustine for many reasons. What does the name Augustine mean to you? It didn’t conjure up very much for me – just one of the famous church fathers who lived long years ago in North Africa. “Son of Tears” is not a heavy story. It’s easy to read in spite of the strange sounding names of Augustine’s friends and all the doctrinal discussions which they hold together in their searching. I liked the feel of the Mediterranean and the style of life then. It helps one to picture Ephesus and Corinth and all the towns which received letters from the Apostle Paul. After all, it was in the 400’s so times couldn’t have changed that much. Especially as I had lived on the Mediterranean myself I could picture the Tunisian countryside.

Augustine’s conversion was dramatic. It didn’t come early in his life. Perhaps you will remember that he had a “praying mother” and then you’ll guess why the title “Son of Tears”. It is by no means a satisfactory love story by modern standards. In fact, just recently I had a letter from a friend to whom I had sent the book last Christmas. This is a good example by the way, of how sometimes books just cannot do for others what they do for yourself – if you are not “in pursuit of God”. She was fiercely critical of Augustine’s mother. Granted she does seem very domineering – but after all this is history and we can’t quarrel with that. She thought that

Augustine was spineless – a surprising conclusion – but simply because of the unfortunate love in his life. She didn't get enthused at all over the later part of his life in which he served God with all his being and thereby shaped an important part of the Christian's heritage.

I won't talk about Idelette except to say that here was a marvelous wife.

Again in the story of John Newton I was strangely moved. First of all I experienced a great anger at the horribleness of John Newton himself and disgust at even reading about such a man. I looked up the hymns he had written and felt – half way through, that I could never sing those hymns again. Ah – but what happens. What an amazing grace. What amazing power God has to regenerate such a terrible man and use him for His purposes. You cannot help but be thrilled by the purposes to which God brought him in the remainder of his long live. Grace Irwin does a masterful job of portrayal and vouches for the authenticity of her tale.

Another conversion which I love to reread is that of the Roman Catholic Hegger in his book “I Saw the Light”. One chapter in particular is very precious – he describes what he imagines heaven to be like.

Now I would like to end by simply reading aloud two different portions of a series for children by the late C.S. Lewis whose conversion and spiritual pilgrimage is written in “Surprised by Joy” and whose gift was to write something very unusual and special for children – something which doesn't need any talking about – I just hope it will give you a feeling of something indescribable.

[readings here from Lewis about his creation of Narnia and from The Last Battle]