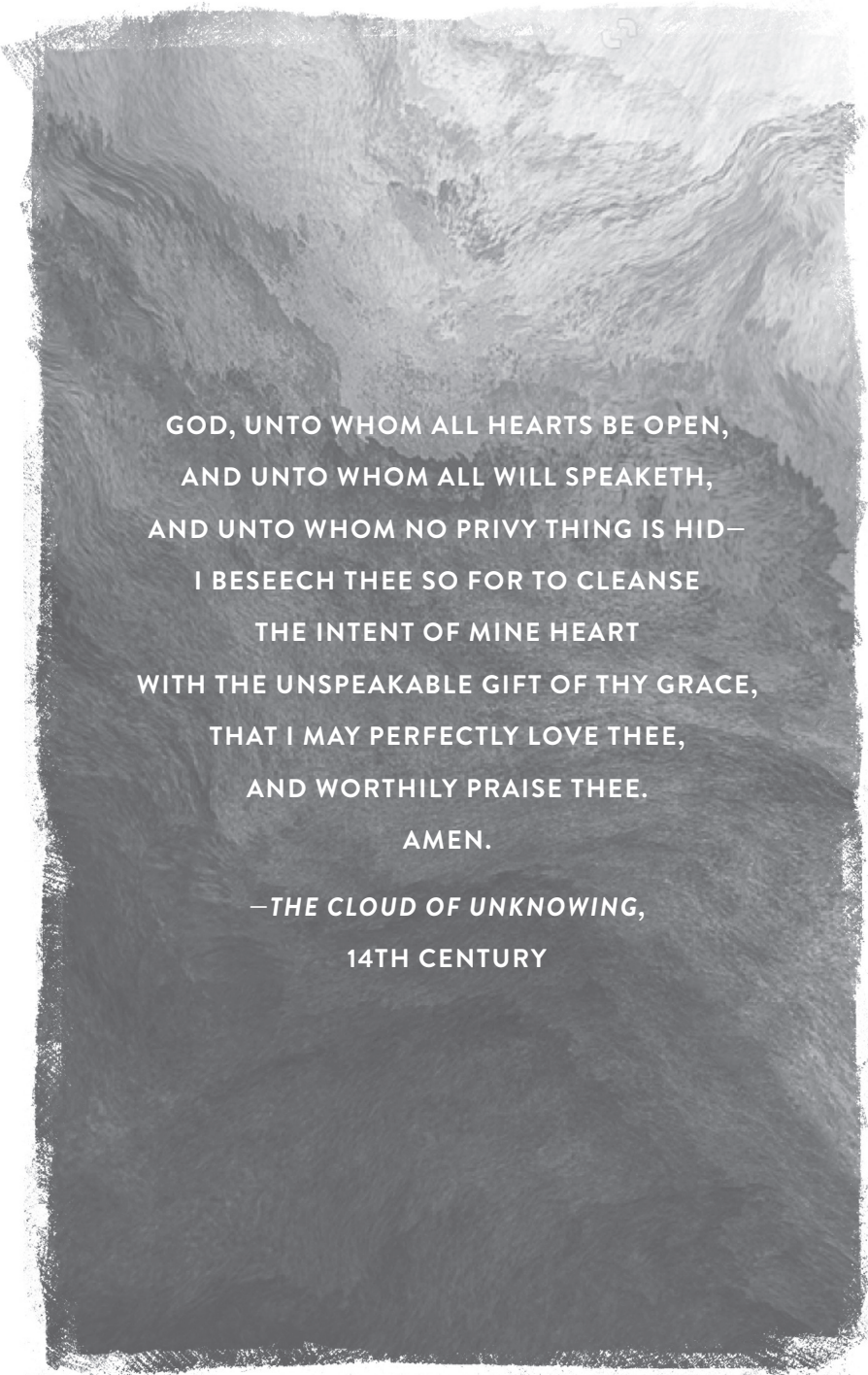


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GOD, UNTO WHOM ALL HEARTS BE OPEN,
AND UNTO WHOM ALL WILL SPEAKETH,
AND UNTO WHOM NO PRIVY THING IS HID—
I BESEECH THEE SO FOR TO CLEANSE
THE INTENT OF MINE HEART
WITH THE UNSPEAKABLE GIFT OF THY GRACE,
THAT I MAY PERFECTLY LOVE THEE,
AND WORTHILY PRAISE THEE.
AMEN.

—*THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING*,
14TH CENTURY

ARE WE MISSING SOMETHING?

Many Christians go through life without reflecting on their closeness to God—but when they do, and they find themselves wanting more, be careful! This rewarding path may take you into difficult territory.

It is my serious conviction that there lies within the framework of fundamental Christianity a place of power and fruitfulness far richer and more beautiful than anything the average Christian at present enjoys.

I have arrived at this conviction by a number of converging roads. Starting from any of several points and traveling straight along, I have come out at the same place, namely, that there is in the simple message of the cross something wonderfully elevated and heavenly which has escaped this present generation of

Christians—or at least it has escaped the rank and file of those who make up the great army of conservative believers today.

For one thing—and this is by far the most important—the Bible itself would appear definitely to indicate this. Peter justified the experience of the disciples at Pentecost by saying simply, “This is that.” The *that* to which he referred was the promise of God in the Old Testament; the *this* was the sudden afflatus of power which those disciples had received a few minutes before. The two corresponded exactly.

If “this” had not sprung out of “that,” Peter and the rest of those Scripture-honoring Jews would have rejected it flatly. But for us the important thing is that the ancient promise *did* come alive in human experience; it *did* leave its place on the Hebrew scroll and enter the living hearts of believing men and women. That which had for hundreds of years been a sacred and well-guarded text now leaps into life and becomes a wondrous, conscious reality in the souls of living men.

We have but to take a quick look at our “this,” which is our present experiential possession, and compare it with “that,” which is what God tells us we could possess if we would, and the startling spiritual discrepancy is instantly apparent.

Another road that led me to the conclusion that we of this day are missing something very wonderful in the Christian life is the road of religious biography. Making every allowance for the spirit of hero worship and the naïve enthusiasm with which religious biographers often approach the task of writing the lives of the saints, I could not escape the conviction that such men as Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Johannes Tauler, and Nicholas of Cusa (to mention but a few of the ancients) *must* have had a knowledge of

God leagues beyond anything we see in conservative circles today.

As a seeker after God I found it rather disquieting to compare the spiritual fervor of such men as François Fénelon, Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Rutherford, or John Wesley with our casual and rather self-satisfied twentieth-century fundamentalism.

Another thing that disturbed me was the fact that the saints of whom I speak were not what they were because of any superior intellectual gifts (though many of them possessed intellects of the first order). Their power lay in their intimate knowledge of God. The aura that picks them out of the shadows of the past was something from God, something spiritual, something inward and heavenly. And when I learned that they had found their treasure within the sacred Scriptures and could give chapter and verse for all they enjoyed, I knew that I at least was missing something which I might possess if I would.

Here is an odd fact: the weakest believer holds in his hand all that the mightiest saints ever possessed. He has at his disposal every grace that made them what they were. This weakest believer actually believes the same things that made an Augustine, a Nicholas Herman, or a Samuel Rutherford. The difference is not one of creed, but of emphasis and experience.

One more road I might mention that brought me to the conclusion that we of today are missing untold spiritual treasures was my own personal experience of God. Through much suffering and with many slips and falls I have been (through infinite grace) led into a land where the grass is longer and the waters cooler than any

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I have known before. And all this without altering one tenet of my fundamentalist creed, and without admitting anything as genuine which cannot be justified by the Scriptures of truth.

Knowing that some good people might call me a mystic or an extremist, and having on my own account a rather cautious mind, I have carefully checked everything as it occurred by the two tests of Scripture and fruit, and I have come to this conclusion: whatever leads a man to adore the Triune God and to trust with growing appreciation the precious blood of atonement; whatever makes him hate sin more intensely, love the brethren with broader charity, love the Word of God as the very fountain of all truth, love God's ancient people, the Jew; respect and obey the laws of the land, and work for the evangelization of the lost world—whatever, I say, has this effect cannot be false or fanatical. It must be of God.

HINDERANCES TO A DEEPER SPIRITUAL LIFE

Now, nothing comes causeless. The thin, bloodless quality of much that claims to be Christian, the failure of believers to enter into their heritage in Christ, the habit of dragging on year after year without spiritual power, the tendency to “grovel here below, fond of these earthly toys,” and the general absence of that moral happiness and spiritual delight which characterized the first Christians, must have a cause.

We dare not say that cause is wrong doctrine, for these things are true of multitudes who believe in the whole Bible and who have never deviated an iota from the truth as taught by the apostles. They are true of many in Bible schools and in missionary soci-

ARE WE MISSING SOMETHING?

eties, and they are true of many sincere ministers of Christ and leaders of the conservative forces of our day. To what then do we trace our failure? What prevents the seed of truth from springing into flower and fruit?

Without pretending to solve the whole problem in a few words, I would nevertheless point out some hindrances which should be plain enough to everyone once the brush is cleared away.

A loss of subjective faith. One thing is this, that for more than a full generation we have been under the influence of a type of Christian teaching which (intentionally or not) constantly stressed the objectivity of the Christian faith at the expense of its subjectivity. Stated simply, the objective in religion is that which is external to me, the subjective is that which is within me. Whatever the psychologists might think of this definition, it yet does define the words as I shall use them.

Now the two elements must be kept in balance if we are to have the true faith of the New Testament. But this we have not done. In our praiseworthy effort to preserve correct doctrine and to magnify the finished work of Christ, we have unconsciously created the impression that Christianity is an objective thing, consisting of certain acts of God done outside of us and apart from us in time and place. We have stressed objective truth to the near exclusion of subjective experience. We have led people to believe that if they accept the historic truth of Christianity, they do indeed possess its true spiritual content.

I submit that the historic facts of Christianity do not constitute the faith of our Fathers. They constitute instead only one-half of it. The other half consists of the contemporary acts of God done within the souls of men, based upon and springing

out of the historic acts already accomplished.

A lack of inner zeal. This almost exclusive preoccupation with the objective elements in the Christian religion has created a generation of textualists characterized by a burning zeal for the letter of the faith, but at the same time revealing a strange lack of understanding of its subjective and experiential elements. Everything is in the text, but the textualists do not explain how to get the vital content of the text into our hearts. The interiority of true faith is overlooked, and we find ourselves like a hungry boy counting the bread and rolls through the thick plate glass of the bakery window. If the boy were to compose a song about what he sees, or write a book telling the number, size, and shape of the loaves in the window, he might win himself a reputation as a pretty good fundamentalist.

I am afraid that for a long time we have been doing just that. We stand greatly in need of men to tell us how to get the bread through the plate glass and into our famished bodies.

There is a justly famous German work (too little known in our day) called *Theologia Germanica*. This little book had a powerful effect upon the life and ministry of Martin Luther, and he was himself responsible for several editions being printed and circulated. The author is unknown, but whoever he was, he saw the pitfall which textualism digs for the feet of unwary Christians, and wrote against it with great clarity and vigor. We would do well to heed his words:

We should mark and know of a very truth that all manner of virtue and goodness, and even that Eternal Good which is God Himself, can never make a man virtuous, good or

ARE WE MISSING SOMETHING?

happy, so long as it is outside the soul. . . . In like manner all the great works and wonders that God has ever wrought or shall ever work in or through the creatures, or even God Himself with all His goodness, so far as these things exist or are done outside of me, can never make me blessed, but only insofar as they exist and are done and loved, known, tasted, and felt within me.

A loss of basic morality. Another cause of spiritual debility in evangelical circles is the divorce between faith and moral living. Without meaning to do it, we have left the impression that there is an impassable gulf between faith and life. And the great emphasis has been upon faith, so that countless thousands have accepted Christ as Savior (if such a thing is possible) without any corresponding shift of attitude toward the world or the flesh.

To teach or believe that true faith divorced from practice is possible to a human being is to convict ourselves of ignorance of both psychology and theology. All things being equal, *a man is what he believes*, and any faith which is not accompanied by a radical moral change is instantly disqualified and proved to be no true faith at all.

A shallow understanding of the gospel. One more hindrance to the deeper life which I would mention is undue emphasis upon the *escape element* in the gospel. To a sinner trembling on the brink of the abyss, there could hardly be sweeter words than those found in John 3:16, "shall not perish." They are hope in despair, they are light in a dungeon, and they are reprieve and escape from the house of death.

Because this is so, and the dramatic moment lies right there,

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the preacher is likely to make much of it and to present it over and over again, returning to it night after night, supporting it with touching stories and pointing everything up to the happy moment when the reprieve is granted. The escape element is so glorious that it tends to become the beginning and the end

of many persons' experience.

Bible teachers too often gear back their exposition to this event and make no provisions for anything beyond it. And if the beginner is urged to "go on," the exhortation usually means little more than that he should study to learn all the reprieve means to him and to marshal more Scripture dealing with that happy truth. The psychology of spiritual advance is destroyed at its start.

I think it can hardly be denied that this describes vast numbers of believers in circles of unimpeachable orthodoxy. These poor sheep simply have no one to show them, either by precept or example, what a glorious world of spiritual riches they entered when the reprieve was granted. So they build little houses on the very borders of the land and never explore the sweet uplands that beckon them on. They then settle down to lives marked by disappointment (which is met by gritting their teeth and exercising "faith"), dull monotony, and pensive hope of something better when the Lord returns.

Now I believe there is for all of us a better life than that. There is a place of power, of inner sweetness, of personal communion with the Triune God, of victory over self, of swift flights on eagle's

wings, of moral delights and spiritual fullness which we all may enjoy. I shall be eternally grateful to our Lord if He sees fit through these chapters to stimulate even a very few to seek such a place for themselves.

BEFORE YOU START: A WARNING

If God has singled you out to be a special object of His grace, you may expect Him to honor you with stricter discipline and greater suffering than less favored ones are called upon to endure.

And right here let me anticipate the objection someone is sure to raise, viz., that God has no “specials” among His children. The Holy Scriptures and Christian history agree to show that He has. Star differs from star in glory among the saints on earth as well as among the glorified in heaven. Without question the differences exist; but whether they are by the decree of God or by His foreknowledge of the degree of receptivity He will find among His children I am not prepared to say with certainty, though I would lean strongly to the latter view.

If God sets out to make you an unusual Christian, He is not likely to be as gentle as He is usually pictured by the popular teachers. A sculptor does not use a manicure set to reduce the rude, unshapely marble to a thing of beauty. The saw, the hammer and the chisel are cruel tools, but without them the rough stone must remain forever formless and unbeautiful.

To do His supreme work of grace within you He will take from your heart everything you love most. Everything you trust in will go from you. Piles of ashes will lie where your most precious treasures used to be.

This is not to teach the sanctifying power of poverty. If to be poor made man holy, every vagrant on a park bench would be a saint. But God knows the secret of removing things from our hearts while they still remain to us. What He does is to restrain us from enjoying them. He lets us have them but makes us psychologically unable to let our hearts go out to them. Thus they are useful without being harmful.

All this God will accomplish at the expense of the common pleasures that have up to that time supported your life and made it zestful. Now under the careful treatment of the Holy Spirit your life may become dry, tasteless, and to some degree a burden to you.

While in this state you will exist by a kind of blind will to live; you will find none of the inward sweetness you had enjoyed before. The smile of God will be for the time withdrawn, or at least hidden from your eyes. Then you will learn what faith is; you will find out the hard way, but the only way open to you, that true faith lies in the will, that the joy unspeakable of which the apostle speaks is not itself faith but a slow-ripening fruit of faith; and you will learn that present spiritual joys may come and go as they will without altering your spiritual status or in any way affecting your position as a true child of the heavenly Father. And you will also learn, probably to your astonishment, that it is possible to live in all good conscience before God and men and still feel nothing of the “peace and joy” you hear talked about so much by immature Christians.

How long you continue in this night of the soul will depend upon a number of factors, some of which you may be able later to identify, while others will remain with God, completely hidden from you. The words “The day is thine, the night is also

ARE WE MISSING SOMETHING?

thine” will now be interpreted for you by the best of all teachers, the Holy Spirit; and you will know by personal experience what a blessed thing is the ministry of the night.

But there is a limit to man’s ability to live without joy. Even Christ could endure the cross only because of the joy set before Him. The strongest steel breaks if kept too long under unrelied tension. God knows exactly how much pressure each one of us can take. He knows how long we can endure the night, so He gives the soul relief, first by welcome glimpses of the morning star and then by the fuller light that harbingers the morning.

Slowly you will discover God’s love in your suffering. Your heart will begin to approve the whole thing. You will learn from yourself what all the schools in the world could not teach you—the healing action of faith without supporting pleasure. You will feel and understand the ministry of the night: its power to purify, to detach, to humble, to destroy the fear of death and, what is more important to you at the moment, the fear of life. And you will learn that sometimes pain can do what even joy cannot, such as exposing the vanity of earth’s trifles and filling your heart with longing for the peace of heaven.

What I write here is in no way original. This has been discovered anew by each generation of Christian seekers and is almost a cliché of the deeper life. Yet it needs to be said to this generation of believers often and with emphasis, for the type of Christianity now in vogue does not include anything as serious and as difficult

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as this. The quest of the modern Christian is likely to be for peace of mind and spiritual joy, with a good degree of material prosperity thrown in as an external proof of the divine favor.

Some will understand this, however, even if the number is relatively small, and they will constitute the hard core of practicing saints so badly needed at this serious hour if New Testament Christianity is to survive to the next generation.