



Held in God's Gaze: *The Light Shines in the Darkness and Nothing Can Put it Out*

From 8 Chapters on Perfection by Walter Hilton

[This short book describes the operation within us of the spirit of love. After considering how God's love seems sometimes distant from us, it describes the dangers of distorted, over-intense, and false love. Finally, it considers the love which is held in the friendship of Christ:]

Chapter 7: The transformation of the soul into the love of Jesus Christ

There are three ways in which the soul may be transformed.

One is for the soul to be made humble and obedient to the will of God, so that it sets itself to resemble him in every possible way, following his actions, and to transfigure and turn and hold in itself Christ's Passion, bearing every shame and rebuke as he did, so that it would rather be like Christ through suffering distress than enjoy all the entertainment in the world.

There is a second way to be transformed with God, and that is when one's soul is united with Christ and becomes his familiar friend. The soul then has a great awareness of his inspiration and many great comforts and delights: yet they are not too great to be expressed in thought and word.

The third kind of transformation is when Jesus Christ and a soul are so perfectly, inseparably and harmoniously united and bound together that Christ is in the soul and the soul is in him as fully as if both were a single spirit, as Saint Paul says: 'Whoever holds fast to God is one spirit with him' (1 Corinthians 6.17). Then the soul experiences high mysteries of Jesus Christ and of his Father and of the Holy Spirit, and it receives such joys from Christ's charity as cannot be fully realized by human thought or expressed in the words of human language.

The first transformation is not enough to rule and govern the affection of man's heart, and neither is the second. The reason is that the fervour of affection, whether its activity is aimed at God or man, is often mightier, fiercer and more dominant than the wise discretion of the soul; and therefore while it is so the love may slip and stumble and err, through being too great or too little.

By the third, however, wisdom and deep knowledge are secretly poured into the soul through that wonderful mingling and union of Christ's shining light with the soul that receives it, so that the soul is taught by the spirit of

discretion how to be ruled, and how to govern the love that it has in Christ. It will be taught to receive spiritual feelings and hidden sweetness and joys in Christ, and how to order, rule and control the fervours of Christ's love and the visits of his gracious presence so wisely, so secretly and so soberly that it can go on experiencing the spiritual comforts of Christ's love quite easily, without revealing itself in the sight of others by laughing or sobbing, or any eccentricity of behaviour.

Moreover, by the same spirit of discretion the soul is shown how wisely, soberly, chastely, meekly and lovingly it shall behave towards fellow-Christians – men and women – and how gladly and graciously to come down to them when it sees that the time, the person and the cause are opportune. And when he sees that such condescension is unwise he will not stoop to them in any way, but keeps remarkably stiff, unbending and strong, like some object that cannot be moved, changed or bowed at all.

The reason is this. God is changeless in himself, but a soul is by nature changeable. When the soul is made one with Christ by love, the more closely it is united the more unchangeable it is, and the less changeability it has, because the wisdom and knowledge, the stability and the light of discretion that the soul has through this union in love gives it love and power: weapons with which it can rule the affection of love for God and for its fellow-Christian without error or deceit. So for a man who has never felt these gifts of discretion, wisdom and grace in his heart it is expedient not to let his affection be completely tied to any creature – man or woman – either individually, secretly or to excess, because of the dangers that may easily result; but let him be frank and open with all and not intimate with any, until he can by this light of discretion know from experience whose company and intercourse he should avoid as harmful and without profit, and whose company and affection he should covet for the ease and support they give him.

From *The Discernment of Stirrings* by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*

[Some spiritual advice has been sought by a young man at the start of his spiritual life, someone who is impressionable, liable to extremes of impulse – he asks for advice specifically about silence, fasting, and avoiding the kind of company which might corrupt him.]

About these impulses on which you ask my advice and opinion: I must say that I view them all with suspicion, for fear they are being conceived in a

way I call ape-like. It is often said that the ape copies whatever he sees others do. Do please forgive me if I am wrong in this suspicion! Nevertheless, the love I have for your soul prompts me to it as does the evidence that reaches me through a spiritual brother who is both yours and mine. He was recently in your area, and was touched by the same promptings as yourself towards strict silence, rigorous fasts, and complete solitude – ‘like an ape’, he admitted to me at the end of a long conversation, and after he had examined himself and his impulses. For, as he said, he had seen a man in your district who, as is well known, observes a great silence, performs extraordinary fasts, and lives in solitude. I have no doubt whatever that the man in question has received true and real promptings, and that they have been through grace alone, experienced within himself, and not by anything he has seen or heard of another’s silence. Had it been otherwise it could be called ape-like, as I am trying to say....

God forbid that you or anyone else should be so stupid and blinded by the sorry temptations of that devil that ‘destroyeth in the noonday’ (cf Psalm 91.7) as to bind yourself by some false vow to any particular practice under the guise of a holiness pretended in the spirit of pious servitude. It will destroy, completely and finally, the freedom of Christ which is the spiritual habit worn by utter holiness, whether in this life or the next. Witness St Paul: Ubi spiritus Domini, ubi libertas. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Corinthians 3.17)

For silence is not God, nor speaking; fasting is not God, nor eating; solitude is not God, nor company; nor any other pair of opposites. He is hidden between them, and cannot be found by anything your soul does, but only by the love of your heart. He cannot be known by reason, he cannot be thought, caught, or sought by understanding. But he can be loved and chosen by the true, loving will of your heart. Then choose him, and you will speak by your silence, and there will be silence in your speech; you will be fasting while you eat, and eating when you fast; and so for the rest....

For all of these are natural things, but how and when to do them can be known only through grace.

And undoubtedly such grace is never got by the sort of strict silence or special fasting or solitude that you are speaking of, for these originate from outside, through hearing and seeing other people do them. But if this grace is to be had, it must come from within, and be learned from God; and for

him you have eagerly longed for many a day with all the love of your heart. For whose sake too you have utterly eliminated from your soul's vision all consideration of anything less than himself – though some of the things I have bid you put away might seem in the eyes of some people effective ways of reaching God. Yes, let them say what they will; just do as I bid you, the result will speak for itself. For to him who is eager to achieve his spiritual purpose it is a sufficient method; he needs no more than the actual thought of God, with a reverent urge of lasting love. Your only means of reaching God is God himself. But you must keep intact that movement of love which you experience in your heart by grace, and not let your spiritual gaze stray from it.... So it is by the experience of this blind movement of love to God that a contemplative soul comes most quickly to that grace of discernment which knows when to speak and when to be quiet, when to eat and when to fast, when to mix and when to be alone, and so on....

Therefore speak when you like and cease when you like; eat when you like and fast when you like; mix when you like and be alone when you like, so that God and his grace can lead you. Let him fast who wants to and be alone if he wishes; let him keep silence too if he so desires. But you must hold on to God who plays no one false. For silence, speech, fasting, eating, solitude and company – all these can mislead you. If you should hear of any man who speaks, or of any that is silent; of any that eats, or of any fasting; of anyone who enjoys company, or who keeps to himself, think to yourself, and say it out loud if necessary, that they know what they ought to do – unless of course the truth is plainly otherwise. But see that you do not as they do (I mean because they do it and you ape them), for you cannot do it nor, probably, are your inclinations theirs. Therefore stop working to other men's specifications, and work according to your own, so long as you know what they are! And until such time, take the advice of people who do know what they are about, though you need not follow their particular inclinations. Such men should give advice in such cases, and nothing else. This is enough answer to your letter.

The grace of God be always with you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**From 8 Chapters on Perfection and Angels' Song by Walter Hilton, translated into modern English by Rosemary Dorward, SLG Press, Oxford, 1992;
A Study of Wisdom: Three Tracts by the Author of The Cloud of Unknowing, translated into modern English by Clifton Wolters, SLG Press, Oxford, 1985**