

FLEE  
BE SILENT  
PRAY

*AN ANXIOUS EVANGELICAL FINDS  
PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH  
CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER*

(Or A Catholic becomes a Protestant and Prays Like  
a Catholic to be a Better Protestant)

ED CYZEWSKI



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# FOREWORD

This is the book on prayer that I couldn't imagine writing 20 years ago. In a sense, I had to write this book because I used to be the least likely person to advocate for what follows. If anything, I would have eagerly (and anxiously) warned against it all.

Twenty years ago, I was a zealous evangelical who grew up in a toxic and restricting Catholic parish, converted to the Protestant branch of the faith in a Baptist church, and then made it my life's goal to undermine Catholicism. Although surrounded by evangelical voices who said that Catholics can't be "real" Christians, I didn't need any convincing beyond my own negative experiences.

Then, something happened: my evangelical faith, that appeared so certain and enduring, crumbled. As I sought to find God in the wreckage, I began to view Catholics with greater charity and appreciation. One reviewer of my book *Coffeehouse Theology* even accused me of secretly wanting to be a Catholic. The reality was this: I knew I had to get over my anger, resentment, and suspicion of Catholics in order to write a book about where our beliefs come from. Church history demands charitable interaction with Catholics. As I struggled to pray in the ensuing years, I started to dabble in the writings of contemporary Catholic authors as a kind of last resort for my faith.

Long story made short: Although a committed Protestant, I had to return to my Catholic roots in order to learn how to pray. Although there were many events and individuals involved in the revival of my faith, my renewed dialogue with Catholic authors such as Brennan Manning, Henri Nouwen, Richard Rohr, Thomas Keating, and Thomas Merton, primarily in that order as well, provided a constructive and life-giving approach to daily spiritual practices that I have sorely needed. As I immersed myself in the prayer tradition that is preserved in Catholicism (but also remains in the Eastern Orthodox Church), I found relief from some of the greatest weaknesses of my evangelical movement, particularly the anxiety that comes from worrying I can never do enough for God or ever become holy enough for God. Mind you, evangelicals are all for the faith and grace of God on paper, but we generally lack spiritual practices that connect us with the transforming presence of God in daily life.

I wrote this book because I believe that contemplative prayer is open for all who wish to practice it and can bring great benefits in the search for God, but evangelicals such as myself may be in the greatest need of this quiet, restful practice that predates the canonization of the New Testament. Our faith is an anxious one, and whether or not you are an "anxious evangelical" today, I wouldn't be surprised if the confident evangelicals of today eventually wind up with the affliction of spiritual anxiety that sent my faith into a tailspin.

Having said that, I do want to make an important distinction from the outset about the "anxious

evangelicals" described in this book and those who suffer from anxiety attacks. If you struggle with anxiety or have regular panic attacks, I don't want anything I write about in this book to bring condemnation about seeking the care of a psychiatrist or psychologist. There are many people I know who have found health and peace by taking medication for their anxiety. Anxiety comes in many shapes and forms. My journey through anxiety, which stems in part from my anxious evangelical faith, is hardly a template for anyone else. People suffering from anxiety should certainly pursue the treatments and practices that they need.

My one encouragement to those who bring serious anxiety struggles to this book is this: don't rule out the ways Christian spirituality can also help. We live in anxious times with anxious religion hardly making things better. It's possible that religion hasn't helped you because you haven't been given the basic practices that have offered peace to previous generations. So just as I encourage everyone with anxiety to keep their medical and psychological treatment options open, I also encourage these same people to remain open to the ways that contemplative prayer can, as an additional benefit to the deeper search for God, lead to greater spiritual and mental health over the long term.

I offer my own story of interacting with Catholic contemplative writers, as a particularly suspicious Protestant, so that readers won't just find new spiritual practices. It's my greatest hope that readers will find a God who is more loving and present than they had ever suspected. When we make "flee, be silent, pray" a part of

our lives, we'll have a chance to reconnect with a Christian tradition that lives and breathes because of God's sustaining presence.

# INTRODUCTION

## EVANGELICALISM IS AN ANXIETY FACTORY

"I consider that the spiritual life is the life of man's real self, the life of that interior self whose flame is so often allowed to be smothered under the ashes of anxiety and futile concern."

- Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, Foreword

### **Evangelicals Can Never Do Enough for God**

Evangelical Christianity in America is an anxiety factory.

As a life-long evangelical, I've absorbed the notion that I can never do enough for Jesus. Words like discipleship and obedience carry connotations of trying harder, doing more, and always bumping up the commitment another notch. Evangelicals affirm grace and "faith alone" in theory, but we also worry that we can never pray enough, serve enough, evangelize enough, read the Bible enough, or "grow" enough to satisfy God. Too many sermons revolve around an obligation to do

more things or to try harder.

It's as if my spiritual life as an evangelical became an ongoing shareholders meeting where I needed to demonstrate increases in profit and potential gains in the next quarter. I'm saved by grace, but when it comes to the actually living like a Christian, I've spent years struggling to pray, failing to meet the standards of my faith, and wondering if I'd somehow been abandoned by God. Even worse, I feared that all of my efforts to reach a seemingly silent God only meant that God is an illusion. This state of spiritual misery didn't even have the added weights that many evangelicals bear, such as fears about church attendance decline, culture wars in America, or defending a particular theology. My evangelical anxiety peaked while in seminary. I suspect that I had a virtually limitless source of material to feed my anxiety by that point.

I know that I wasn't alone in my fearful, anxious condition. That's just where many evangelicals are or will eventually end up because we have lacked the practices of the historic church that lead to peace and communion with God. Fear not. The path to peace with God is closer than you can imagine. Mind you, most evangelicals aren't going to like what I'm about to suggest.

Evangelicals can escape their current anxiety entrapment with three deceptively simple practices:

Flee

Be Silent

Pray

Author Henri Nouwen writes that these three

"actions"—flee, be silent, pray—form the basis of the contemplative prayer tradition that blossomed to life with the desert fathers and mothers. Nouwen shares the story of Abba Arsenius, who left his high status as a Roman Senator in ancient Rome in order to seek God in the desert. When he prayed: "Lord, lead me in the way of salvation," he heard a voice saying, "Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the sources of sinlessness."

Can you imagine an evangelical church, school, or institution incorporating these three elements into their foundational mission, vision, values, beliefs, and staff manuals? I'm pretty sure this would be written off as madness. And if you read some of the stories about the desert fathers and mothers, some of us may even go so far as writing them off as crazy extremists. However, the spiritual legacy of this isolated and silent movement continued for centuries throughout the Western church until being confined to monasteries more or less during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. It was never lost in quite the same way in the Eastern Church. The pursuit of God in silent, contemplative prayer is the exact opposite of my anxious striving, studying, and cultural crusading as an evangelical, and it took humbling myself under the teachings of Catholic authors like Nouwen to finally find the peace of God that had long eluded me.

Contemplative prayer is the only cure I know of for our holy anxiety because it places all of our faith in the love and mercy of God. Contemplative prayer is the intimate experience of God within us. It begins with a simple intention to be present for our loving God and

trusts God's indwelling Holy Spirit will do the work of prayer within us. Contemplative prayer is often described as a time of waiting on the Lord (Psalm 27:14), turning our eyes upon Jesus (Hebrews 12:-12). While contemplative prayer dates back to the early church and runs through the many streams of Christianity to this day, the contemplative writers who have helped me the most are Catholics—the one group I spent the early years of my faith trying to discredit and dismantle. I'm still a Protestant's Protestant who would probably shoot off fireworks on Reformation day, that is, if my anxiety didn't make me afraid of doing such things.

Ironically, some anxious evangelicals get even more anxious at the mention of contemplative prayer. *Isn't that too Catholic or Eastern Orthodox? Isn't that Buddhist? Isn't that a slippery slope into NEW AGE RELIGION?* Evangelicals are terrified of slippery slopes that start out innocent enough. One minute you're doing a downward dog stretch in a yoga studio and then the "eastern religion" slippery slope takes hold. Next thing you know, you're offering a fruit bowl to a pleasant little false idol statue somewhere in Asia. *We've all heard that this happened once to a friend of a friend of someone we knew once at a church somewhere.*

Evangelicals are also so anxious about losing our faith and not doing enough for Jesus that we're afraid of other Christian traditions that somehow "feel" like a different religion. Tragically, these Christian traditions, such as Catholicism, that are outside of our religious experiences have the potential to offer a resolution to the struggles and worries of evangelicals. This practice of contemplative prayer is just as old as the New Testament canon.

Mind you, even the Catholics themselves tried to kill mystics and contemplative teachers at times, often settling for imprisoning them and burning their books. They even went as far as banning the more mystical parts of the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius in the 1500's because they weren't intellectual enough. Many of the writings from Catholic mystics turned up long after their deaths because they were unable to share their works that empowered people to experience God outside the authority structure of the church. Mysticism in general became associated with "frowned upon" spiritual experiences that authorities could not control. Meanwhile the early Protestant reformers saw the whole lot of Catholicism and decided to just not go there at all—contenting themselves to translate the Bible and to burn each other at the stake over theological disagreements. Whether disliked, feared, neglected, or a mix of all three, contemplative prayer in the Western church went from being THE way to pray, to being a prayer practice largely restricted to the monasteries.

Contemplative prayer can be particularly intimidating for American evangelicals who are addicted to doing things. We gravitate toward solutions that revolve around doing something else or changing something in our homes or, if we hit the jackpot, buying something new. We want progress and growth by acquisition in our consumer based faith that has little use for spiritual practices that involve seeking solitude, sitting still, saying nothing, and then trusting God to work in unseen ways.

Contemplative prayer tells us that we can't add anything to what we already have in Christ, we can't do

anything different to make God love us more, and we probably need to buy/own less things in order to minimize our distractions. Contemplation is about doing less so that God can do more. Contemplative prayer makes it possible to enjoy the benefits of our union with God. We aren't getting ourselves out of the way in order to become nothing. We're getting our distractions out of the way in order to experience the something of God—even if that something often feels like "nothing." While the contemplative tradition appears in several different camps of Christianity today, I have found the most life through the writings of Catholic contemplatives. I have also turned to their works kicking and screaming, choosing them only as a last resort.

I grew up under the suffocating teaching of controlling Catholic priests and thought I found freedom in the wild west of evangelicalism. The music was better, the people appeared happier, and I didn't have a priest telling me how to read the Bible. Evangelicals did all kinds of great things, from fighting culture wars to serving people in need. We studied more, worshipped more, and served more than anyone else. When I immersed myself into evangelicalism in seminary, I burned out and crashed hard. I dropped my seminary diploma into a dusty pile of theology books and realized that I had no idea how to pray. I didn't even know if God existed. I could exegete scripture in the original languages, but I didn't have words to pray. Little did I know, I wouldn't need many anyway.

After graduating from seminary, eager evangelicals exhorted me to attend membership classes, peppy worship services, and outreach events. The evangelical

solution became: do more things, say more words, and read more scripture. I had nothing left for God, if there was any God. I started to find a lifeline for my faith in the ancient prayer practices of the church, including contemplative prayer, when a pastor I knew from one of my seminary classes invited me to his new prayer service. This was back when all of the "cutting edge" evangelicals were experimenting with liturgy, candles, prayer books, and, in the extreme cases, "art." In the worst case scenario, some also added incense into the mix. This pastor didn't strike me as the type to jump on a trend. I think he genuinely wanted to figure out ways to make church meetings more meaningful and to provide a deeper connection with God. Reluctantly, I agree to show up.

As a former Catholic, liturgy, chants, and candles were the last thing I wanted out of church, but I was desperate enough to prove myself as a Christian and to prove that God is real. If anything, attending his service felt like a huge step backward. Evangelicalism was supposed to be my savior from the seemingly lifeless liturgy of my Catholic days.

The whole service was completely unlike anything I'd experienced as either a Catholic or an evangelical, even if you could trace many of the practices to both the Catholic and Anglican traditions. We chanted about God's love, we spent time centering on the Jesus prayer (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have mercy on me, a sinner), and we meditated on scripture using the slow reading practice known as *Lectio Divina* that helped us pray the words of scripture. I kept worrying that I was doing it wrong and

wondering why I wasn't having an encounter with God. It didn't work. Either I was hopelessly broken or God wasn't real. I returned home defeated and plunged deeper into my spiritual despair, returning to those prayer practices again from time to time just in case.

Little did I know, this pastor had sown the seeds for my spiritual liberation from my anxious, hard-working evangelical tradition. These prayer practices would take root over time, teaching me how to pray and to rediscover the love of God.

As I've confronted my fears and anxieties related to my faith, I've frequently returned to two verses: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18) and "for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice" (2 Timothy 1:7)--"cowardice" is also translated as "fear" in some other versions. If you are experiencing fear, especially fear of God, then you are not receiving something from God. If you are filled with fear, then the only way to drive it out is to seek the love of God. While contemplative prayer and related spiritual practices aren't the only avenues for experiencing the love of God, contemplative prayer is one of the oldest and most reliable spiritual practices from the historic church that has deepened the awareness of God's love for many of its practitioners.

I have found it refreshing that the foundation of contemplative prayer isn't a matter of what I need to do or to become. Instead of frustrating myself time and time again by trying to live differently, I needed to be reoriented around the love of God. My guides in the contemplative journey, such as Brennan Manning,

Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and Richard Rohr, taught the simple biblical truth that God is actively seeking me (and you) and that God is already present, loving me just as I am. Unworthy, un-sanctified, and distant from God, it didn't change God's love for me. God's love is preemptively with us before we try any new prayer practice. There isn't a spiritual height I needed to reach in order to "unlock" or "earn" God's love and presence.

If that strikes you as a major stretch because of what you've been taught about sin or depravity, try asking, "What if?" What if God loves me right here and right now as I am? What if God is already among you and me, prepared to be present among us in prayer? Would that potential reality change how you pray and how you practice holiness? What if the many scriptures about waiting on the Lord, God's compassion and mercy, God's loving-kindness, and God's love for the world have been overshadowed or obscured? Would it be so bad to try believing that God is more loving and merciful than you suspected?

Evangelicals are good at giving us causes to fight for, and some are worthier than others. While some of us may be called to a cause, this emphasis in evangelicalism puts the cart before the horse. We need more than commands, teachings, and obligations to live fruitfully as Spirit-filled followers of Jesus. We need God's transforming love. Until we can pray, serve, and minister out of God's love, we'll forever struggle with anxiety over not doing enough for Jesus or losing something that we had to fight to gain. We need to know that there's a parent who loves us

unconditionally and that transformation and holiness proceed out of the peace and security of that love.

Of course most anxious evangelicals aren't primarily concerned about the deep roots a particular approach to prayer has in the historic church. As an anxious evangelical, I wanted to see clear biblical proof that these practices come straight from inspired scripture. We could run in circles arguing about this particular evangelical approach to scripture and tradition, but coming from an evangelical background, I had no other way of entering into contemplative prayer. If I was really going to buy the contemplative approach to prayer that begins with a deep trust in God's present love, I needed the Bible to change my mind before I would fully trust the Catholic authors who were going to lead me into contemplative prayer. When I started to look for the love of God in the Gospel stories, I was shocked to see what I had overlooked for many, many years.

This unconditional parental love of God is precisely what Jesus communicated to us through his Baptism and transfiguration, the two foundational moments for his ministry. Anxious evangelicals will find more than enough hope in these two pivotal moments in the Gospels.

## **A Cause to Fight for or a Parent Who Loves Us?**

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And

a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Matthew 3:16-17

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Matthew 17:5

What formed the foundation of Jesus's ministry?

The beginning of his ministry and the point when he turned toward Jerusalem were both preceded by identical statements from God the Father: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

I find it really easy to jump past these statements, just as it's easy to overlook just how frequently Jesus set off to pray by himself. If Jesus was a member of the Trinity to begin with, why did he need the affirmation of God? Why did he wake up early to pray, pull praying all-nighters, and venture into the abandoned wilderness?

To a certain degree, Jesus modeled what ministry and a relationship with God is supposed to look like. He was fully God and fully man, but he mysteriously manifested the power of God through his humanity. Paul writes:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in

human likeness.

Philippians 2:5-7

I'll leave the Trinitarian particulars of Paul's statement to people who are smarter and better read than myself. What we can't avoid is the fact that Jesus ministered fully in human likeness and received the loving affirmation of God, identifying him as his beloved Son, at two pivotal moments in his ministry. Before Jesus preached about the Kingdom, healed the sick, or dined with the "unworthy," he received affirmation from God. Because of that affirmation, he had nothing to prove. His identity was secure, and there was nothing anyone could give to him or take away from him that mattered more than the loving affirmation of the Father. He was God's beloved Son, filled with love to share with those in need and to protect himself against the anger and criticism of others.

Reflecting on the ministry of Jesus, Rich Mullins wrote that Jesus "gave love away like the sky gave the rain and sun." His love for others was ever-present, empowering him to show compassion to the crowds who were tired, hungry, and needy, always asking for another miracle. His love extended to the quarrelsome Samaritan woman engaged in a theology debate in the heat of the day in order to mask her personal history. When his friends ran away, executioners drove nails into his hands, and mockers shouted insults while he slowly suffocated to death, Jesus gasped words of forgiveness. As Peter stood before him sopping wet, half naked, afraid, and ashamed of denying him, Jesus continued to extend mercy and acceptance to his friend.

Where did this capacity for love come from? While I don't claim to know the deep mysteries of God, the Bible appears to point at the Baptism and the Transfiguration as essential high points in the ministry of Jesus that we ignore at our peril. Here is God literally speaking words of love and affirmation for his Son. If you've ever thought that hearing God speak from a cloud would help you figure out what to do with your life, that's exactly what God did for Jesus. And we shouldn't overlook the fact that God could have said anything.

What would we expect God to say to us from a cloud?

What would be so important that God would literally shout it from the sky?

My version of God at different points in my life would have said things like:

*"Don't forget that the Bible is inerrant and fully inspired in all that it ordains and teaches!"*

*"You should have gone on that mission trip!"*

*"Why don't you pray more?"*

*"I 100% agree with the doctrine statement you signed at your church."*

*"I hope you haven't had sex outside of marriage... or masturbated. That's the worst."*

*"You better not be ashamed of sharing the Gospel... what's your name again?"*

Isn't it amazing to think that God could have said anything to Jesus at the start of his ministry and before its final climax, and yet he chose to say, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." The force of

this may be lost on us because we assume that of course God loved Jesus since Jesus is God and God loves God and of course God would like God-self--or however the Trinity works.

Just as Jesus came to change what his listeners thought about the Kingdom of God, Jesus also helped us redefine the love and acceptance of God. This preemptive love and affirmation introduces us to grace and to the pure Gospel of God's loving care for us as our creator and compassionate king. If we can grasp what God wants us to know through these interactions with Jesus, the rest of the Gospels make a lot more sense. In a single line we have the complete summary of the Prodigal Son parable. Whether we have rebelled and run away or we have stayed behind and judged those who don't measure up, God the Father runs out to both of us. Both the rebellious and the self-righteous are being pursued by the parental love of God. Both have a place with the Father.

You can walk the religious line or obliterate it. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more or to become more unworthy. We could even argue that Jesus' love was so large that it ultimately led to his downfall. Didn't Jesus equally offend every single person in his audience because he showed the same radical love and acceptance to every single person? He loved and accepted Samaritans, tax collectors, the sexually promiscuous, Pharisees, Roman soldiers, common laborers, and revolutionary religious zealots. He patiently answered the questions of the Pharisees, dined with the most notorious sinners, praised the faith of Roman soldiers who were aligned with pagan deities and particularly evil rulers, and

ministered alongside the common people and revolutionaries. Wealthy women and hardscrabble fishermen supported him and traveled with him. The love of Jesus was large enough for every political group, religious faction, and socio-economic class. The only way to ensure that you'd find Jesus offensive is to believe that your views would have been completely on the same page as him. I assure you, he would have welcomed or dined with someone who deeply offended your sensibilities.

You could take him or leave him, and regardless of how you responded, his love was large enough to remain secure in his identity and ministry despite widespread rejection and hatred among his own people--even his own family. If you changed your mind about him, he always had an open invitation for you to return. The largeness of his love begins with the expansive love of God the Father that affirmed him right from the start and continued into his ministry's darkest hours.

There's a spiritual principle that emerges from Jesus' teachings: we can only give what we have received. We cannot give grace to others unless we have been shown grace first. This is at the heart of Jesus' parables where those who have been forgiven much are capable of extending the same forgiveness to others, while the most wicked are those who receive mercy and then fail to show it to others. Those who receive God's mercy are the ones who can extend mercy to others. This is why Jesus described the life of God as a spring of water bubbling up within us. We aren't intended to be buckets or cisterns that store a limited amount of water, dispensing it sparingly to the select few. The life of God in us should be an

abundance that comes from God's healing presence in us rather than our own efforts or attentiveness. You don't become a bubbling spring of God's life through duty or study. You can only tap into the life of God by doing the "work" of abiding in the vine. The life of God takes care of itself in us as we connect with God. This abiding in God's love is where prayer has proven essential for my own spiritual restoration.

When I led a brief retreat for writers, I very honestly told the participants that the most significant time of the retreat would be the 20 minutes of centering prayer toward the end of our afternoon together in complete silence. We spent the first few hours laying a foundation of scripture, reading the writing of others, and reflecting on the states of our lives. After providing some simple guidance and suggested scriptures and words to center on, we gave ourselves 20 minutes to sit before God. In the days that followed, I heard from nearly a dozen participants who had been deeply ministered to by God during the 20 minutes of silence. Most of them sat with a verse of scripture and waited on God, letting God speak through a word or a phrase. They said that in the following days they were free to live in the freedom and life of that prayer time, and it dramatically changed their daily interactions and tasks. They had tapped into God's abundant life and suddenly had more than enough to share with others.

There's no doubt that we had to set aside time and mental space for our retreat. There is a certain amount of "effort" in the act of abiding. We have to train our minds to sit still and learn how to be fully present for God in the

now. We won't find God by dwelling on the regrets of the past or worrying about the future. If we want to find God, we must train ourselves to be in the present moment. That isn't to say we are earning God's love or tricking God into loving us. Rather, we are becoming aware of God's love that is already present for us. This love that was present at the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus is present for us as well.

Keep in mind that both events happened in relatively remote places, and while the baptism had more people present than the transfiguration, both were moments of withdrawal from the events, concerns, and tasks of everyday life. Jesus set off to the wilderness in both cases in order to make space for meeting with God. That isn't to say that God wasn't present in the everyday events of the city. Rather, withdrawing provided an intentional, concentrated moment to hear God speak.

Let's make a "big" assumption right now. Let's assume that you have a mission to share the Gospel of the Kingdom. Let's assume that you've been sent to tell all people about the Kingdom of God and that Jesus is alive today. What kind of training would you want for this mission? Better yet, what would you want God to shout at you from a cloud? What is the one thing you need to know above anything else? Could God say something in 15 words or less (assuming God is speaking to you in New Revised Standard Version English) that could change the course of history forever?

What if you were stepping out into ministry today and a cloud zipped up right over you, and the voice of God spoke to you by name:

You are my child...  
Whom I love.  
With you I am well pleased.

You haven't shared the Gospel, served a meal, visited a prison, ministered to the sick, or supported a single heart-broken person through loss or tragedy. You haven't proven yourself worthy of anything. There is no success story to report, nothing to measure, and nothing to "celebrate" in front of a crowd. And yet, God is giving you the one and only thing that you need for your life and for your ministry. If this one thing isn't good enough for you right now, nothing else will be good enough. You'll most likely spend the rest of your life burning out and living in fear that you're not worthy, not doing enough, and never, ever good enough for God. If you can't live out of the abundance of God's love for you, other people can become a threat to your accomplishments, doctrinal purity, and status. It's far safer to treat people who disagree with you as threats, dangers, and heretical outsiders. If you become the guardian of the gates you become indispensable and powerful, protecting the black and white categories of religion. Decisions become cut and dry matters based on what's safe and what's a threat. This fraudulent version of Christianity doesn't have much need for a God who shows up on day one to proclaim unconditional love and acceptance.

Without a foundation of God's love and acceptance, Christians are cut off from the capacity of God to love others generously and unconditionally. If we aren't

declared God's beloved children on day one and if we must perform in order to please God, then we better work harder, debate theology endlessly, and worry that we have never done enough to merit God's acceptance and approval.

Evangelicals such as myself have been rallied to the cause of Christ based on facts, demographics, and scripture verses. These things can serve us well in their place, but they are not the foundation. They are not the starting point that sends us to serve others from the depths of God's endless acceptance and mercy. A cause is a good thing, but when a cause is married to religion, we have a perfect storm for anxious religious people who are always trying to outdo each other in their commitment and purity. Is it any surprise that today we have extremely contentious evangelical factions in the American church who are all convinced about their own doctrinal and activist purity?

Even if we can affirm that God's love and acceptance formed the foundation of Jesus' ministry, perhaps we need to become convinced that this love and acceptance is for us as well. Can God truly think of us in the same way as Jesus? Does Jesus actually intend for us to fully participate in the parental love of God today?

### **Does God Love and Accept Us like Jesus?**

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.

Ephesians 3:17-19

I could point you to plenty of verses about the love of God. However, it's quite another matter to believe that God's love defines his interactions with us and to actually accept that love of God for myself. It's even harder to sift through all of the other things that the Bible says about God in order to figure out how they relate to his love for us. Oftentimes, these stories and doctrines of God, such as his justice, holiness, and omnipotence, begin to overshadow his immeasurable love. Instead of being filled with this love to the measure of the fullness of God, we may end up being filled with fear of God or indifference toward a seemingly cold and ruthless deity.

Even if Paul said that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:35-39), there are plenty of distractions and misconceptions that obscure it.

If there is one lifeline I've needed for prayer as an anxious evangelical, it's the foundational truth that God's preemptive, unearned love for us forms the foundation of prayer. Some may even argue that God's love is more or less what prayer "is." Thomas Merton writes:

"All desires but one can fail. The only desire that is infallibly fulfilled is the desire to be loved by God. We cannot desire this efficaciously without at the same time desiring to love Him, and the desire to love Him is a desire that cannot fail. Merely by desiring to love Him, we are beginning to do that which we desire. Freedom is perfect

when no other love can impede our desire to love God. But if we love God for something less than Himself, we cherish a desire that can fail us. We run the risk of hating Him if we do not get what we hope for. It is lawful to love all things and to seek them, once they become means to the love of God. There is nothing we cannot ask of Him if we desire it in order that He may be more loved by ourselves or by other men" (*No Man Is an Island* 17-18).

Whether or not we realize it, anxious evangelicals have often tried to prove themselves as spiritual insiders who are worthy of God's love, evangelicals have focused on foundations, systems, interpretations, beliefs, and other boundaries that define who we are and who doesn't belong with us. We are so eager to be on fire for God, to make extreme sacrifices for God, and to prove, without using the word "prove," that we are holy and worthy of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on the cross. If Jesus gave his life for us, don't we owe him the same thing? If Jesus gave us a job to do, shouldn't we hop to it without delay?

Even worse, our fears about God taint our ability to pray. Richard Rohr writes, "Most don't know how to surrender to God. How can we surrender unless we believe there is someone trustworthy out there to surrender to?" (*Everything Belongs* 69). The God that I learned about for so many years in the evangelical fold wasn't a God worthy of devotion. This was a God who only accepted me because he figured out a loop hole through the death of Jesus. This God was prepared to send me into the eternal flames of hell if Jesus hadn't intervened. It's no wonder I struggled to pray to this God. Why wouldn't I resort to formulas and simple

supplications and rote words of praise? It's not that I was turned away by a God who didn't match my sensibilities and preferences. It's that I had missed the God that Jesus revealed and shared with us. Sinners in the hands of an angry God is a far cry from "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

If we allow ourselves to dwell with the words of Paul in Ephesians 3 for a moment, we may be surprised by the implications. First, we are rooted and established in love as our foundation. Love is our starting point. Is it a stretch to say that God is calling down from heaven to speak over us "This is my child, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"? I don't think Paul would say that's a stretch at all. In fact, Paul makes the point that God's love isn't just our roots and our stability, but God's love is what transforms us into the fullness of God. This is a love that surpasses our knowledge and extends into every conceivable direction. If we're going to take the Bible at its word, the love of God should continually shock us. If we are not routinely challenged in our knowledge and experience of God's love, then there's more to find today.

We dare not add or take away from the words of scripture. This is the love of God that compelled Jesus to die and to rise again. This is the love that existed eternally among the Father, Son, and Spirit, and we are welcomed into this love as fully adopted children (Ephesians 1:5). We have been chosen to partake in this preemptive love that has been extended to us before we could even think of ways to prove ourselves worthy.

## **Uprooting Evangelical Anxiety**

So much of evangelical anxiety can be traced back to the ways we misconstrue, obstruct, or add conditions to the passionate love of God for us. Transformation always follows repentance, and transformation can take time--that seems to be the central message of the apostles' many failures in the Gospels. However, we won't begin to resemble Jesus unless we follow his same process of transformation and minister out of the same source. This is where the evangelical focus on the cross and atonement theories have taken our attention away from the life that Jesus modeled for us. Richard Rohr notes, "It seems that we Christians have been worshipping Jesus' journey instead of doing his journey" (*Everything Belongs* 20)

Contemplative prayer can be one way that we are filled to the full measure of the fullness of God. Most evangelicals have not been prepared to understand or experience the love of God in this personal, immediate way. I learned about God's love as one doctrine among many to affirm, a fact to be grateful for, and something to reciprocate. God's love was something I "could" experience in theory, but devoting 10, 20, or 40 minutes a day to God's presence and love was far outside my experience. If anything, I was trained to be suspicious of anyone who makes too much of love at the risk of losing sight of the many other boundary markers that defined a "faithful" evangelical. Duty and devotion click for evangelicals, but resting in God's love, quietly waiting on God's love, or patiently enduring the silence of a dark night of the soul sounds a bit off to many evangelicals. However, the church fathers and mothers would certainly

be astounded to see such a large segment of the church cut off from these practices and so fearful to even try them.

Evangelicals have been trained to be full of many things, but love is rarely one of them--not that you can even train someone to love. As a result, we are anxious wrecks trying to prove that we are true insiders committed to the Gospel, affirming the authority of the Bible, able to condemn the right people, and to welcome the right people. We sign doctrinal statements and cut ourselves off from anyone who deviates or could be on a "slippery slope" toward deviating from them. God is often detached and mechanical in much of our theology. I struggled to pray because I couldn't imagine that the God I'd studied and tried to serve actually loved me. Was this God actively reaching out to me? Was this God willing to hear my prayers? As I struggled to pray, I assumed that either I'd messed things up beyond hope or that God wasn't real. Some days it felt like a relief to not believe in that God.

The God I found in the writings of modern Catholic authors and the contemplatives from church history (who influenced much of their writing) revealed a very different kind of God. I could finally find the freedom to pray and to experience God's transforming presence in my life when I received God's love first rather than trying to earn it or prove myself worthy. Jesus wasn't disappointed in me. If anything, he was the heartbroken lover longing for me to come back to him.

The Psalms tell us to wait patiently on the Lord. I used to read that as a kind of passive aggressive move on God's part. Here I was, desperate for God, waiting and praying with all of my heart. Would it kill him to show up when I

pray? Through contemplative prayer I have learned that I had everything completely backwards. God has been waiting on us all along, but we are often too distracted, impatient, or fearful to meet with him. God's love is here and constant, and there is nothing I can do or feel to change that reality. I can ignore it or obstruct it, but I can't stop it.

Learning to pray isn't about turning on the tap of God's love. Rather, learning to pray is about training ourselves to be present for the love of God that is already at work in our lives. Evangelical anxiety tells us that prayer isn't working because there must be something wrong with us. On the other hand, we follow every imaginable rule and still come up empty, then the problem must be with God. Evangelical anxiety focuses on results and progress, but God is more concerned about loving presence. Contemplative prayer has taught me that God's love is present and that I need only seek God in order to pray. I may have an epiphany, but I most likely will not. God's love is steady and constant, and many days I have to settle for taking that on faith. In fact, focusing on my feelings and experiences have been my greatest barriers to contemplative prayer. I have had to completely shut down my anxious evangelical tendency toward measuring and proving my spiritual vitality and worth.

François Fénelon wrote, "How will you go on to maturity if you are always seeking the consolation of feeling the presence of God with you? To seek pleasure and to ignore the cross will not get you very far. You will soon be trapped in the pursuit of spiritual pleasures" (*100 Days in the Secret Place* 11). The journey into contemplative

prayer calls on us to think differently of God and of ourselves. Very little depends on us. The spiritual "work" we do in contemplative prayer is very different from the spirituality of many evangelicals who are bogged down with lists of beliefs, practices, and activities that we must do in order to pursue holiness or the presence of God. We're never doing enough to win God's love or to achieve any kind of lasting life transformation. How could we? God's love is already ours, and until we learn how to simply receive it, we'll get stuck in an anxious rut of performance, failure, and struggle.

The first step in many spiritual practices such as the Examen and centering prayer is a simple acknowledgement that God is present. That is so very different from my assumptions as an evangelical Christian who used phrases like, "I'm waiting for God to show up." Theologically I could explain divine omnipotence, but practically I struggled to believe that God was truly present with me and, most importantly, loving me right in that moment without preconditions.

Contemplative prayer took some practice and effort at first as I unlearned the anxious prayers of evangelical Christianity and sought to quiet my many thoughts and expectations. Along the way, I've found that contemplative prayer is less about what I do or the results I "experience." Contemplative prayer guides us toward resting in the fullness of God and God's love. It's a peaceful practice that pulls us away from striving, fear, and defending boundaries. As we learn to trust that God is present and we even become more aware of his loving presence, we'll begin to experience the transforming

power of God in our lives. You simply can't resist living with greater compassion and grace after experiencing the acceptance of God. This is the true prayer of a little child in the Kingdom. If you can only call out, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," in faith and reliance, then you can pray. My own pride and hopes for spiritual advancement kept me from seeing how badly I needed to become like a little child in prayer.

In the chapters that follow, I'll share from my own meandering journey toward the present love of God and contemplative prayer in particular. I needed to learn several spiritual practices along the way that aren't technically "contemplative" practices, but they became essential aspects of my own path. I don't share my own story because I have excelled in any way more than others. Rather, my shift toward contemplative prayer has been a dramatic one that demonstrates how anyone, even the most hostile skeptic, can benefit from it.

I went from being a Bible-thumping defender of the faith who viewed Catholics with anger and suspicion to a lover of Catholic authors and contemplative prayer practices. How I view the Bible and prayer have changed dramatically over the years, and the destination I didn't even know I was looking for was contemplative prayer. I suspect that may be the case for many other struggling evangelicals, not to mention Christians in other traditions in need of contemplative prayer. I have also chosen to limit the authors I cite to those who have proven pivotal at key points in my path toward contemplative prayer rather than providing a comprehensive guide to all things contemplative. I'll provide a list at the end of the book with

further reading suggestions. Whether you enter into this book with a simple desire to pray more or you genuinely feel like God has let you down in some way, I trust that there is room for you in this loving search for God that begins with God's loving search for you.

I trust that in the midst of your daily work, relationships, and responsibilities that God is present with you today. Whether or not there's a dove or a cloud present, God is speaking a message of acceptance and grace for you. Surely the Lord has been with you and you did not realize it. Whether you need a booming voice from heaven to shake you free from your anxious thoughts or you need a gentle whisper to call you back to your first love, God is speaking to you right now in this place. This message is for you and you alone. It's the message you've been waiting for your entire life, even if you didn't know you needed it. It's a word that is stronger than death and able to transform the hardest of hearts. If you want to step into the deeper experience of prayer and the peace of God, this is the lifeline that you will cling to day in and day out. It is the beginning and end of the Christian life. It is the message that keeps our world spinning and the sun rising anew each morning with fresh mercies settling like dew on the ground. This message is for you if you can take it on faith, even right now:

"You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Beloved, we have nothing to prove and everything to gain as we step into contemplative prayer together. May

our fears and anxieties disintegrate as we experience the width and length and height and depth of God's love for us.

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