

Returning to God and Wanting to See and Know God

God as the Source of Our Lives

- Since our lives come from God, we always remain in relation to God, even during those times we leave God and fall away from God.

God as the Purpose and Goal of Our Lives

- Since God is the source of our lives and we live only through our connection with him, the purpose of our lives is to return to God, to recognize who he actually is, and to know and love him.

Our Likeness to God

- Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, there is a point of connection and similarity between God and ourselves. The purpose of our lives is to live into this reality and become as much like God as is possible for a created being; we are to be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48).

Likeness to God Involves Being Perfected in Love

- To become “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4) means that love will be perfected in us (1 Jn. 2:5; 4:12,17) until we arrive at a perfect love that casts out all fear (1 Jn. 4:18).
 - Such a person will experience no obstacles in guiding his or her body and actions toward the service of God, for love does no wrong but fulfills the law of God by loving the neighbor (Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14 James 2:8; see further Gal. 5:22-23; Titus 3:2).
 - Because we have entered into Christ’s death through baptism (Rom. 6:3-5), “our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing” (Rom. 5:6) and “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). This love “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14) so that all Christ’s followers may be perfectly one (Jn. 17:23)

Our Present Incompleteness and Weakness as the Place Where We Encounter God, Receive God’s Help, and Are Perfected in Love

- Paul notes that in this present life, we have not yet obtained this perfection and fullness of love (Phil. 3:12) and yet we press on (Phil. 3:13-14), believing that God’s grace is sufficient for us and that his power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9; compare 2 Cor. 4:7).

The Hope That Sustains Us: That We Shall See the God Whom We Love and Know Him as He Is Job 19:25-29:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh *I shall see God*,
whom *I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold.*

Matthew 5:8

Blessed are the pure in heart, for *they shall see God*.

Hebrews 12:14

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one *will see the Lord*.

Evagrius' Teaching on Seeing and Knowing God

- Returning to God and being conformed to his likeness begins with discernment, repentance and inward warfare against sinful thoughts (Evagrius call this the “practical life”).
- As one progresses in the practical life, the mind is restored to its right state and is able to pacify and unify the other faculties, experiencing transcendent joy and being able to see and love God (*Eul.* 6.6).
 - “An intellect at peace becomes a shelter for the Holy Trinity” (*8 Th.* 4.12).
- In this state, the mind is not fixated upon images of created things and if these should pass before the mind, it does not attach to them or react against them, but simply allows them to pass by. When the mind is no longer fixated upon images and is not disturbed by their presence or absence, the mind can focus without distraction on God.
 - There is nothing wrong with created things or images of created things *per se*, except that they are less than God.
 - We can, however, accept suggestions (from the powers of evil or our own fallen nature) to attach to created things (or images of created things) with a love that is so great that it should be directed toward God alone.
- When the mind ceases to fixate on created things and attends to God, a peace and freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*) appears in one’s inner life.
- Evagrius calls this *apatheia* (impassibility).
 - “Impassibility is the tranquil state of the rational soul, constituted by godliness and chastity” (*Reflections* 3).
- In the state of impassibility, each of the parts of the soul is well and functions according to its original created purpose.
 - The mind is filled with love for God.
 - “Love is the bond of impassibility and the expunging of the passions; it brings patience to the fore and it has a cooling effect on boiling irascibility; it promotes humility and topples pride” (*Eul.* 21.23).
 - The irascible (reactive) part cuts off all opposing thoughts and diversions, which brings a stability to the soul that allows one to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17).
 - “Irascibility is a power of the soul that is capable of destroying thoughts. The mind engaged in contemplation is like a dog, for through the movement of the irascible part it chases away all impassioned thoughts” (*Refl.* 8-9).

- Desire becomes correctly focused and is guided by a limitless longing for God and an immeasurable eagerness to do what love requires (*Praktikos* 57).

Knowledge of God comes in two forms:

- (1) The first involves coming to intuitively understand the purposes which guide God's action toward the world (i.e., the ways he structured the created world and the reasons why he acted in this way).
 - a. Knowledge of these things comes to us through our union with the Son, who created and ordered all things (Col. 1:16; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 1:10).
 - b. "Christ in that he is Christ, possesses substantial knowledge; in that he is creator, he possesses the reasons of the ages; in that he is incorporeal, he possesses the reasons of incorporeal beings" (*Refl.* 1).
- (2) The second involves seeing God's action toward us (his love and goodwill coming to us for our good).
 - a. Strictly speaking, we cannot know God as he is, because this is beyond all created things and concepts and is infinitely greater than created minds can comprehend.
 - b. At a certain point, even the metaphors used in Scripture describe God come to an end.
 - i. A metaphor helps us to understand something unknown by showing one point of similarity or analogy with something that is known.
 1. Consider, for example, Daniel 7:9, "[T]he Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool." This picture points to the way that God has existed through untold ages.
 - ii. The problem with metaphors is that they break down pretty quickly. God is not a guy with white hair. Furthermore, God has existed for ages in a way different than any created thing, since he never had a beginning and suffers no aging as time advances. (Indeed, he exists outside time itself and is not limited or affected by the passage of time.)
 - iii. So what do we learn from the metaphor? Surprisingly little, because of God's fundamental difference from all created things.
 - iv. In fact, one must be careful with identifying God with the created things pictured in the metaphor or one will begin to worship something created in place of the Creator.
 1. "To see the place of God, to speak to God in the place of prayer, means climbing above all impassioned thoughts and all depictions, including non-sensory ones... The place of God is, by definition, 'unimaged' (*ἀνείδεος*, *Reflections* 20, cf. 22), meaning that the mind itself, when it becomes the place of God, is free of self-created imagery (Columba Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus," *A History of Prayer: The First to the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Roy Hammerling, Leiden: Brill, 2008, 160-161).
 - c. Evagrius responds to this problem by arguing that
 - i. Although we cannot know God as he is in himself, we can know him as he comes to us

- ii. In coming to us, God adapts himself to our limits and shows himself by using the least material and least limited thing in creation: light.
- iii. Scriptural background for this idea.
 - 1. 1 Tim. 6:16: God “dwells in unapproachable light” which created beings have no capacity to see, unless God should reveal it (“whom no one has ever seen or can see”)
 - 2. Ps. 36:9: “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.”
 - 3. Ps. 43:3: “Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me.”
 - 4. Ps. 104:2: “covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent”
 - 5. Ps. 118:27: “The Lord is God and he has made his light to shine upon us.”
 - 6. The explanation of God’s glory (an extension of his person that reveals his character) identified with transcendent light and rests above all upon the Son.
 - a. Mt. 17:2: “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.” Compare the description of the angel of the Lord in 28:3; Acts 12:7.
 - b. Jn. 1:4,9: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men... The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”
 - c. Jn. 8:12: “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”
 - d. 2 Cor. 4:6: “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”
 - e. 1 Jn. 1:5: “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”
 - f. Rev. 21:23: “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”

So basic is this identification of God’s outpouring of life with light that even the Evil One tries to imitate this to confuse believers:

2 Cor. 11:14: “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

Monologistic Prayer

To allow the mind to remain focused on God, Evagrius (like other contemporary desert fathers) recommended the silent repetition of a short prayer taken from Scripture, e.g. “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” (cf. Lk. 18:38-39; Mt. 9:27; 20:30-31; Mk. 10:47-48). “Lord, help me” (Mt. 15:25; compare Ps. 38:22; 40:13: “O Lord, make haste to help me”) or “Son of God, help me.”

Monologistic prayer became a common practice and the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. At a later time, the phrase typically used was lengthened to “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner,” and was at repeatedly softly aloud and then afterward constantly in the heart, even as one went about life’s usual activities.

In the Byzantine period, there was a tendency to combine the repetition of this prayer with certain patterns of breathing, which after they were learned, became natural. This allowed the rhythms of the body to support and reinforce the rhythms of prayer in the mind. Sometimes a prayer rope (Grk. *komboskoini* or Russian *chotki*), woven into knots from black wool, was also used. This was typically held in the left hand between the thumb and the tip of the finger/fingernail, slowly moving from knot to knot.

- Early Muslim mystics (Sufis) imitated the Christian practice and took over the repetition of simple phrases in prayer combined with breathing exercises and certain patterns of movement (*dhikr*). Prayer beads (*tasbih*) were also used to recite short sentences of praise or the 99 names (i.e. attributes) of God.
- By the late Byzantine period (particularly after the hesychastic controversy in the fourteenth century), Evagrius’ conceptions of monologistic prayer and seeing the divine light during prayer became essential features of Eastern Orthodox spirituality. (Gregory Palamas developed these ideas in particular way that become normative in the subsequent Orthodox tradition.)
 - This tradition of hesychastic prayer has been promoted especially through the writings of
 - Monastic leaders of Mount Athos in Greece, such as Elder Joseph the Hesychast (1898-1959) (see *Monastic Wisdom: The Letters of Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, Florence, AZ: St. Anthony’s Greek Orthodox Monastery, 1999).
 - The Russian Orthodox bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov (1807-1867) (see *On the Prayer of Jesus*, Boston: New Seeds, 2005) and Archbishop Anthony (Golynsky-Mihailovsky) (1889-1976) (*Two Elders on the Jesus Prayer*, tr. Igor V. Ksensov, New Skete, 2006).
 - The popular narrative *The Way of a Pilgrim* (nineteenth century; various translations, e.g. that by Helen Bacovin, which is very readable but sometimes uses familiar Western language to describe Russian Orthodox practices).
 - Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer That Tunes the Heart to God*, Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009