



Meditation Before Studying Theology:

Lord, thou art in me and shalt never be lost out of me,
but I am not near thee till I have found thee.

Nowhere need I run to seek thee,
but within me where already thou art.

Thou art the treasure hidden within me:
draw me therefore to thee that I may find thee
and serve and possess thee for ever.

--Walter Hilton

Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O holy God, whose mercy and pity made thee descend from the high throne down into this world for our salvation: mercifully forgive us all the sins that we have done and thought and said. Send us cleanness of heart and purity of soul; restore us with thy Holy Spirit, that we may henceforth live virtuously and love thee with all our hearts; through Jesus Christ thy Son. Amen.

--Richard Rolle

Week #11b: Walter Hilton and *The Ladder of Perfection*

Other Works of Walter Hilton (c. 1343-1396)

- *On the Mixed Life*
- *Eight Chapters on Perfection* (summary extracts from a book by a Spanish spiritual writer who had studied at Oxford)
- *Of Angel's Song* (against teachings peculiar to Richard Rolle and his followers)
- An English commentary on Ps. 90 (Vulgate) *Qui habitat* (attribution to Hilton probable)
- A commentary on Ps. 91 (Vulgate) *Bonum est* (less certain)
- *Conclusiones de imaginibus* (against Lollardy, defending the veneration of sacred images)

Structure of the Work:

Consists of two books, apparently written on different occasions between 1380 and 1396 and intended to meet different needs. (Book 1 originally circulated independently and Book 2 was apparently written later and treats some of the same themes in greater depth and with greater maturity.)

The work was originally addressed to a woman who had taken religious vows; similar works addressed to a religious woman living in seclusion include

- Aelred of Rivaulx (d. 1167) *De institutione inclusarum* (“On a Rule of Life for Recluses”; tr. into Middle English in 14th c.)
- *Ancrene Wisse* (written in Middle English in the 13 c.) and
- *Meditationes vitae Christi* (“Meditations on the Life of Christ”; ascribed to John de Caulibus; written in Latin in the late thirteenth century [?] and translated into Middle English in the early fifteenth century).

Augustinian theology as the background for the work; cf. the soul as a reflection of the Trinity in I.43.

(Some of the practical advice is interesting and reminds one of the *Ancrene Wisse*; compare I.83 on how to handle a visitor.)

Book 1 discusses **re-forming of the image of God in man** (now defaced by sin), as one is renewed in the likeness of Christ.

Book 2 is a more advanced and in-depth treatment of progress on the road toward contemplative union with God, discussing (briefly) the relevance and use of baptism and confession.

Book 1 begins with **definitions of the active life and the contemplative life**

- **The active life:** There are certain words and outward actions that are necessary for us to do, even from the beginning of the Christian life. For example, one must
 - say prayers,
 - discipline the body by fasting to look beyond preoccupation with easy pleasures/bodily gratification so that one can create time and space to look to God
 - help those in need, etc.
- When Hilton describes the active life, he is primarily thinking of actions familiar to all like
 - repentance (contrition/compunction/sorrow for sin) and
 - the pursuit of works conducive to virtue (fasting to discipline bodily desires, almsgiving and care for the poor, the sick, widows and orphans)--required of all
- **The contemplative life:** Beyond the actions, there is also focused time spent in solitude looking to God in prayer and meditation
 - Lat. *contemplatio*=attentive consideration given to God during prayer/meditation, with a single-minded focus on God, apart from any external action or distractions introduced by the senses (e.g. images)
 - Hilton defines the contemplative life as an undistracted devotion to a life of prayer so as to arrive at a deeper knowledge of God and Christ.
 - Note that the contemplative life presupposes and is built upon the foundation of the active life; see p. 17 (X).
 - The contemplative life is open to all but practiced only by a few.
 - Hilton’s pastoral sensibilities remind us that there can never be an absolute divide between the active life and the contemplative life.

Note, e.g. the exception on p. 13 (VI), where a life of prayer can never exempt us from the need to comfort those in distress.

- Book 1 distinguishes 3 degrees of contemplation
 - Knowing God through reason and learning alone
 - Knowing God in the affections (emotions) only
 - Knowing God through both cognition and affection—the goal of spiritual advance insofar as we can attain it in this life
 - Here the goal is “the reformation of faith and feeling” which we will further discuss below
- **The mixed life:** Ministering in the world in Christ's name while devoted to a disciplined life of prayer at different times throughout the day (compare Gregory the Great's earlier remarks in *Pastoral Rule* II.5 on contemplation and condescension to serve others). This is the life of the faithful minister and the godly layperson.

Which of These Three Lives is the Best?

- Certainly an individual may feel more drawn to one of these types of life more than the others, but at the end of the day we will only be well when we arrive at a balanced position, taking proper account in our lives of what is important in both the active and contemplative lives, in the way that is appropriate to our own individual calling (vocation).
- The pastor must especially be grounded in both types of life (moving from a commitment to pursuing deeper repentance and prayer out into active ministry in the world).
 - Pastoral ministry, in other words, is by nature (and requires) a mixed life.

The Ultimate Goal: "The Reformation of Faith and Feeling"

God's salvation/healing aims to restore the whole of our nature to its original goodness. Since Christ assumed the whole of our nature, it is God's will (and, by Christ's work, now actually possible) for every part of us (mind, will and emotions) to be renewed in Jesus Christ; the renovation of our nature is not complete until this has occurred.

In contrast to Richard Rolle, Hilton is less dependent upon imagery and sensation; Hilton in fact says little about his own mystical experiences and even seems to suggest that he is discussing matters beyond his own personal experience in I.9 and I.33.

- **The reformation of faith**=God's work of restoration is begun in us by baptism and repentance/confession, in which
 - repentance and conversion move us by grace from love of the world into redirection of life
 - **we are freed from the bondage of sin** (justification and regeneration) **even though one's feelings (including both our conscious affections and those underlying desires of which we are scarcely aware) have yet to be reoriented and reordered by grace** (Rom. 7, understood to apply to the post-conversion experience, as an example of this).
 - This is why **bare faith** must sustain us, **showing us that our sins are forgiven and we have been accepted by God even though our inner states do not always seem to reflect this change,**

because our loves have not yet been reordered to fully correspond to our new state.

- "Many people possess virtues--such as humility, patience, charity toward their neighbors and so on--but only as a matter of rational choice and directed will, having no delight in them. Such a person will perform virtuously, but often with grouching, heaviness or even bitterness in the doing. Nevertheless, **perform them he does, prompted rationally out of a fear of God, [having]...no proper love or affection of virtue [=the good] for its own sake**" (p. 43).
- "What is a man but his thoughts and loves?" (I.88)
- Both our minds and our emotions must undergo conversion.
- **The reformation of feeling =a sanctification affecting one's spiritual consciousness** (not a justification by feeling)
 - requires discernment since inner experience is not self-explanatory or necessarily as it seems
 - desire, though not a prerequisite for grace, is a channel by which grace does enter the soul
 - **One comes to delight in the God**, i.e. God is contemplated and (tangibly and experientially) grasped by the spiritual senses of the souls (the souls tastes, savors and delights in the sweetness of his presence)=the illuminative way
 - **The soul is united to Jesus by divine love in a way that drives out competing, lesser loves and base desires** and creates in the soul an increasing likeness to the divine image (=moral qualities like evangelical humility, supernatural love even for enemies and those who have hurt one)=the unitive way.
- Hilton Qualifies His Preceding Remarks:
 - This new **delight in Christ does not mean**, however, **that the soul at the beginning of its progress will not still experience some pain at the memory of past sins, but this is a sign of grace acting upon the conscience rather than a sign of God's displeasure.**
 - Example: The anxieties and misgivings that can arise when people begin to perceive their frailties and experience remorse for the past may lead them to wonder if they are truly forgiven and have peace with God (= "scruples").
 - Some evangelical pastors today might view this guilt as good and to be encouraged, since it will lead people to act/work.
 - According to Hilton, however, this guilt arises from mistaken understanding and is not to be encouraged.

- This is a false and needless anxiety. It is misdirected compunction under the effects of sin.
- **Rightly directed and understood, being pained by past sin can move us to greater trust/dependence upon the God, which will heal and give hope to conscience/feeling**
- **Sensible pain thus can play a positive role in our spiritual development and should not be cut short, denied or suppressed, nor should it be treated as a sign of God's displeasure.**
- Similarly, **the soul, in leaving behind the false light of worldly attachments** and deliberate sin but has not yet having attained a purer and more undistracted love, **may also find itself bereft in darkness for a time, since it has withdrawn from most worldly delight but has not yet been sufficiently purified to be able to experience the satisfaction of knowing** and being united to God through contemplation.
 - In spite of this apparent darkness (which helps to purge and purify the mind and affections from lingering sin), Christ remains present and at work within the soul, not so obviously in the realm of sensation and imagination as in his reformation of the mind (by the Holy Spirit moving reason to truth and the will toward the undistracted love of God, producing stillness and contentment within the soul).

Holiness/Advance Is Not Guaranteed by Fervor or Felt Zeal

- Divine love, in whatever form of life it is experienced (active, contemplative or mixed), consumes all worldly, lesser loves, purifying the soul of all base and sinful habits and attachments (p. 20 [XIV]; cf. *Scale*, pp. 65-66 on the image originally fouled by sin and, regarding its purification and restoration pp. 52-53,58,63,65,73).
- Desire for God and the love of God feed one another, so that one is either stirred up to greater love and desire (which becomes habitual) or one becomes cooler and more carnal in his or loves and desires (p. 21 [XIV-XV]).

Since the love of God is the principal thing, it must be affirmed (against Rolle and his followers) that spiritual experiences (visions, hearing angel-song, etc.) are not strictly necessary to growth in faith, love and prayer and even when such remarkable experiences accompany prayer as incidental effects of contemplation they are not such a great matter (p. 21 [XV]; cf. *Scale*, p. 74).

- Spiritual movements in the soul are given to different people in different ways and degrees: see p. 58.
- Neither are dramatic emotional expressions required or necessarily helpful unless their true character (i.e. their relation to the faith of the Church and the fruit of the Spirit) is properly discerned (pp. 24-25 [XVII]).

- Emotion is never self-explanatory but provides matter for discernment, since feelings are tied up with love and may in some ways be rightly ordered and in other ways not.
- We should not try to produce or simulate religious emotion or affections in ourselves (trying to induce or create physical or quasi-physical sensations or perceptions so as to make ourselves arrive at some supposed religious perfection, all the while actually looking away from Christ, the Church, and external spiritual counsel).
- It is also not prudent to apply or exert too much pressure or force upon ourselves in the hopes of gaining what an experience or state we wish to have or retain, for these things are given of grace (pp. 33-34 [XXVIII]; *On Angel Song* 18; cf. *Scale* p. 54 and II.24: "Abide grace, suffer easily, and break not thyself too much.")
 - Indeed overstraining oneself emotionally can imbalance and damage oneself, making oneself more vulnerable in temptation (because of the greater frailty of one's constitution), without gaining any actual spiritual advance.
- Even when we experience consolations of divine love, our dwelling upon them must be tempered by the demands of charity and our obligations to others (pp. 32-33 [XXVII]).
 - Note the cautions against unhealthy introspection (troubled by doubt, leading to fearful self-examination and critical self-evaluation in pp. 21 [XIV], 25 [XVII], 31 [XXVI]).
- **The point is to focus upon directing all of our desire toward Christ** (and expressing that in whatever outward action is appropriate) and (with the faith of the Church; cf. *Scale*, p. 86) **trust that he is sufficient** for the remission of our sins, rather than wasting our time obsessing about ourselves (see Hilton's counsel on pp. 58,66 and esp. 92 on loving oneself for the grace God has given one).
 - This is a corrective useful not only for
 - (a) the sensitive and **scrupulous** who suffer from false guilt, needless anxiety and despair as a self-imposed affliction (though there is a legitimate and profitable sight of the darkness and ugliness of our sin in self-examination which moves us to seek God and his mercy, see pp. 80-81), but also
 - (b) those who have a **unhealthy ambition which expresses itself through a desire for novel and unusual experiences** by which they might set themselves above the common lot of men.(cf. p. 51) and lacks charity and meekness/evangelical humility (p. 87,89-90,92).

Note also the role that Jesus' humanity (with its frailness and suffering) plays in laying a basis for our meditation and devotion and the way this leads to assurance that one's sins are forgiven and one has peace with God (see p. 59,73).

- Christ's humanity is what purifies us and leads us up to contemplation and union with God (p. 64).
- Although a complete ("one flesh") union with Christ may not be had in this life, yet the desire which (by his grace) we have for him, his presence and this more

perfect union drives us on through this life toward our goal (p. 22 [XVI]; cf. *Scale*, p. 74).

- This desire is a gift of his grace and love for us and we should not ignore or neglect this desire but rather attend to it and let it inform all of our actions, giving it an active expression (p. 24 [XVII]).
- This desire for Christ, which is the gift of his grace and leads us to recognize that "Jhesu is all and that he doeth all", is thus "the root of all effective service" (idem).