

Letters to My Father



DEAR GOD,

Everyone down here is all a-twitter over the new century. Of course, I needn't tell You that they're all shy of the mark by about 365 days. There may be a segment of our society that begins counting at '0'—those with pocket protectors filled with pens and pencils in their short-sleeved white shirts, those with visions of bits and bytes swirling in their heads—but I believe that You begin counting at '1.' And, let's face it, this is all one of Your ideas anyway.

Besides, I've never quite understood all the hoo-ha over a new year—*any* new year. I mean, what's the big deal about turning over the next page of the calendar, even if it is a new calendar with new pictures. Still, it is a bit exciting, wondering whether or not the world's computers will still be breathing when the clock ticks over to 1/1/2000.

The pile of Christmas cards on the desk in the front hall is lower this year. But then, that only corresponds to the lower number of cards we send out. Tit-for-tat, you know. It's a curious custom we humans have designed. Oh, not that it isn't a perfectly suitable tradition to send greetings to loved ones to celebrate the anniversary of Your Son's incarnation. The odd part is how we have padded that simple eloquence with traditions of mysterious origins.

Over the centuries we've determined that in our Christmas greetings we should enclose a synopsis of the family's doings over the last year. Just what this custom has to do with the celebration of Christ's birth escapes me; I suppose it grew out of our inherent practicality, taking the opportunity to save postage by combining the year's news with the Christmas card.

Don't get me wrong, Father: it's not an unpleasant tradition. If those whose pens have been silent the rest of the year choose this occasion to write, then I'll open their envelope with glee—especially when they've enclosed a family picture. Now *this* is a most agreeable extension of the otherwise curious tradition, a delightful custom that has its practical benefits as well:

"Would you just look at that! Uncle Harlan's wearing a toupee now!"

"My my—Betty's put on some weight this year."

They sought God eagerly, and he was found by them. So the LORD gave them rest on every side. 2 Chron. 15:15

"Well, *they're* getting grayer."

"That vacation must have set them back some."

"Where *did* she get that hideous outfit?"

Our snotty *bon mots* aside, it's wonderful seeing the faces of those near and dear. The most pleasant use of the tradition is to chronicle the steady progress of family life.

Most of the holiday pictures we receive are peopled by children, and for those of us far away the snapshot tucked inside is the only means we have to watch their transition from one milestone to the next:

"Isn't she darling. And doesn't she look just like her mother?"

"He's becoming quite a little man."

"Doesn't he get haircuts anymore?"

"So *that's* her new boyfriend. Isn't he a skinny thing?"

"Isn't he handsome in his cap and gown. My, where has the time gone."

"Have you ever in your life seen a more beautiful bride?"

Until the day arrives when the child in the earlier pictures has become the parent, holding the new edition in her lap for the photographer:

"Isn't she darling. And doesn't she look *just* like her mother?"

Which brings me, Father, to the reason for my writing. There's really nothing special about the transition from one year to the next. There's really nothing magical about the stroke of midnight on December 31st; it's just one

Aspects

Encouraging believers to know God and His ways, and to enjoy a more intimate communion with Him

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more page turned on the calendar. But the New Year is as good a time as any to take stock of my progress. Just as our children inevitably grow up and older, maturing from child to adult, so too should I be maturing in my relationship to You.

As I study the progress of loved ones in the pictures sent every Christmas, I wonder about my own. I wonder if I'm growing, maturing in Your ways. I wonder if I'm growing up. My goal is to so integrate Your life into mine that ultimately there no longer will be any line of demarcation. Father, You shouldn't be an appendage; You should be my *all*. You're not to be a trophy won, set into a padlocked glass case, but a living, breathing Spirit who has dominion over every corner of my life.

So, God, I've come to talk it over with You—to ask: How am I doing? ✉

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.
Psalm 139:23-24



Dear God,

We finally—*finally*—had our first snow this week. Thank you. What with it being so dry during the end of summer, our autumn came quickly this year. We've been brown and dry for so long I was beginning to recall with absent fondness the days when we lived where it was never *supposed* to rain. As much as I love the seasons, there's little good that can be said about the picture of skeletal trees, bereft of their clothing, arched over a sadly old carpet of brown grass. So it's with high anticipation that each winter I scan the northwest horizon, awaiting that arctic blast that will convert the western moisture into snow.

And my rising before dawn (when only the birds have wakened from their slumber) to plow the fresh snow from the drive is made easier by the new beauty that surrounds my labors. The brown ugliness that had overstayed its welcome is now covered over with the clean blanket of powdery white. The trees in their twisted convolutions are now decorated by the frosting that fell piece by piece from the cold night sky.

But then I realize that the ugliness is not truly gone, but only covered over—and temporarily at that. When in a few days the temperatures rise, and the sun pushes away the gray clouds to beam down upon the cold blanket, the beauty will shrink into clear water, and leave in its wake the brown ugliness—now wet.

And, Father, I wonder if I've done the same in my life: only covered over the ugliness. I'm taught by this age that

"When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;
wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,
learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.
"Come now, let us reason
together," says the LORD.
"Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;
but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the
sword."
For the mouth of the LORD
has spoken.
Isaiah 1:15-20

In the Bible the offer of pardon on the part of God is conditioned upon intention to reform on the part of man. There can be no spiritual regeneration till there has been a moral reformation.

The promise of pardon and cleansing is always associated in the Scriptures with the command to repent. The widely-used text in Isaiah, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool," is organically united to the verses that precede it: "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow." A. W. Tozer

image is all, that a pretty covering is all that is required. No one really cares about the ugliness hiding beneath. All that matters is that someone look and sound good. No one really cares that the loveliness is only a thin veneer.

But You don't work that way. You see deep down, far below the plastic and pot metal of our pleasant shells, to examine the true colors of the heart. And if I'm to examine myself by Your standard, I'll have to remove the thin layer of accommodating goodness with which I've draped myself. I'll have to reveal the frank truth of my life.

The snow outside my window is beautiful, but it will take only a few degrees and a little sun for it all to melt away. And whatever beauty and goodness I may display to the rest of the world can just as quickly melt away when the heart burns hot with anger, childishness, jealousy, and corruption.

Father, dig deep! I open myself to Your thorough examination, to reveal the covered-over ugliness for what it is. As the alcoholic only starts the path toward health when he admits his weakness, so will I only begin to rid myself of the dark ugliness lying within when I admit to You that it is there. And where something has lain buried so long and so deep that I've forgotten it is there, please, good Father, seek it out and cut it away. ☒

I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. Ezekiel 11:19-20

Dear God,

Few things in this world are as dependable as the flurry of activity at the bird feeder when it snows. No matter the time of year, a fresh batch of seed will always attract some takers, and there seems to be a direct relationship between falling temperatures and rising interest in a handout. But like polite visitors during the first few minutes of a party, the birds are few in number and peck tentatively at the source of their nourishment.

Let a few snowflakes fall from the sky, however, and quickly the area around the feeder becomes a Convention of the Winged. All good manners are tossed aside as the feeding frenzy begins. It's as if the snow reminds Your feathered creations that they are, indeed, hungry—and that they'd better be about the business of filling their bellies. What the snow has reminded them, of course, is not so much that they are hungry, but that in a very short time all their other sources of food will be covered over by a heavy, icy blanket. They feel the urgent call to fill their bellies to bursting, in case their next meal is some time off.

My tears have been my food
day and night,
while men say to me all day long,
"Where is your God?"
These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go with the multitude,
leading the procession to the house of God,
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving
among the festive throng.
Psalm 42:3-4

Man is such an odd creature, Father. Why have You made him this way? You've made man to strive toward something better, to improve himself, but then once he has bettered his situation, he forgets those instincts that brought him there in the first place!

What have we gained by rising above our primitive instinct for survival? What have we gained by acquiring such sophistication that we need no longer clamor and strive to be fed? What have we gained by losing our hunger for You?

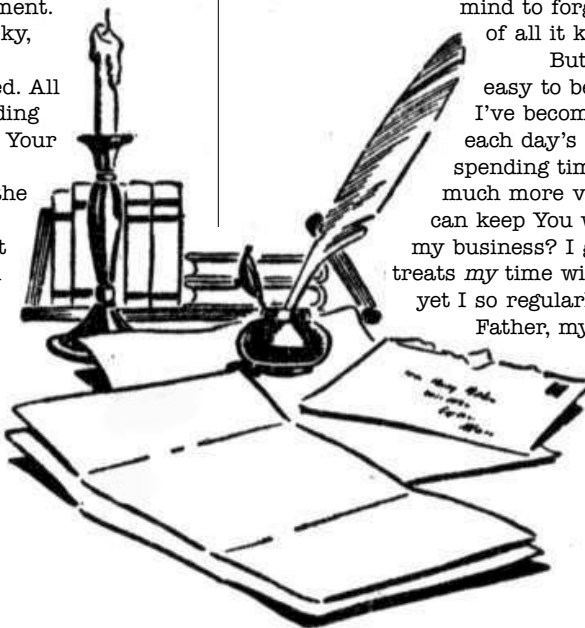
In winter, even more than during the rest of the year, those living in the wild have one overriding purpose: to feed their hunger. They expend most of their energy in the singular pursuit of simply staying alive. But for modern man, life has become so easy that we've lost the instinct for hunger—the instinct to want something so badly that finding it becomes our passionate, single-minded pursuit.

We build a big, beautiful church, a house of worship to honor Your name—but then we spend all our time gazing upon the expensive edifice instead of Your face. We pave its floor with thick, expensive carpet—but then we forget how to kneel upon it before Your throne. We carry under our arm the latest translation of Your Bible, thick, and bound in rich leather—but we don't take the time to read and learn what You've written there.

I don't want to live that way, Father. I want to *keep* my hunger. Even if my body has become fat and satisfied, I don't want my heart to forget its yearning. I don't want my mind to forget that You are the source of all it knows.

But I *have* lived that way. It is easy to begin a day without You, and I've become proficient at plowing into each day's activities without first spending time with You. Is my time so much more valuable than Yours that I can keep You waiting while I first tend to my business? I get angry at the doctor who treats my time with such callous disregard, yet I so regularly treat You—my heavenly Father, my Lord—in the same way.

O God, where did my hunger for You go? ☒



As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God? Psalm 42:1-2



Dear God,

It's not only that dramatic December 31st when all four digits of the year's chronometer roll over at once that I use the occasion to pause before the expanse of Your limitless ribbon of time. At the close of every year I am struck once again by Your unbounded power, and the scope of Your investment in this earth.

It is a dizzying sensation to lean back in one's chair and to contemplate the full width and breadth of what we know of You. That panoramic view begins, of course, far back in the dark recesses before mankind was born, before You even created the universe in which he would be set. (That moment is 'dark' only for us who were then the unborn; I would imagine that You were then, as much as now, bathed in the full brilliance of Your own light.)

Some people wonder why You bothered. Those who don't wonder—those that don't think about it at all—are often the ones who believe we sprang from the primordial ooze, that our ancestors crawled up from the slimy amoeba, passed through the simian stage, miraculously evolving into intellects that would invent the light bulb, the microwave, and the two-digit year. These misguided morons remove You from the process all together. Those who *do* wonder question

why You, being omnipotent and self-sufficient, even needed to create imperfect creatures. Was the Godhead lonely? Did You feel the need to create something that could worship You?

I prefer to think that You created man because, just like any other creative spirit, You had to. It's simply who You are. Oh, Father, not that You *needed* to, as if some external force was in charge, or that You would be something less than whole if You didn't. But the artist creates something from nothing because there is a powerful, overwhelming urge that wells up from deep within. It is part of his nature. The artist requires no logical reason to create; it's simply what he has to do because it is part of his nature. ☒

We are part of Your nature. ☒

Ah dearest Lord! I cannot pray,
My fancy is not free;
Unmannerly distractions come,
And force my thoughts from Thee.

The world that looks so dull all day
Glow's bright on me at prayer,
And plans that ask no thought but then
Wake up and meet me there.

All nature one full fountain seems
Of dreamy sight and sound,
Which, when I kneel, breaks up its deeps,
And makes a deluge round.

Old voices murmur in my ear,
New hopes start to life,
And past and future gaily blend
In one bewitching strife.

My very flesh has restless fits;
My changeful limbs conspire
With all these phantoms of the mind
My inner self to tire.

I cannot pray; yet, Lord! Thou knowst
The pain it is to me
To have my vainly struggling thoughts
Thus torn away from Thee.

Sweet Jesus! teach me how to prize
These tedious hours when I,
Foolish and mute before Thy Face,
In helpless worship lie.

Prayer was not meant for luxury,
Or selfish pastime sweet;
It is the prostrate creature's place
At his Creator's Feet.

Had I, dear Lord! no pleasure found
But in the thought of Thee,
Prayer would have come unsought, and been
A truer liberty.

Yet Thou art oft most present, Lord!
In weak distracted prayer:
A sinner out of heart with self
Most often finds Thee there.

For prayer that humbles sets the soul
From all illusions free,
And teaches it how utterly,
Dear Lord! it hangs on Thee.

The heart, that on self-sacrifice
Is covetously bent,
Will bless Thy chastening hand that makes
Its prayer its punishment.

My Saviour! why should I complain
And why fear aught but sin?
Distractions are but outward things;
Thy peace dwells far within.

These surface-troubles come and go,
Like rufflings of the sea;
The deeper depth is out of reach
To all, my God, but Thee.

Frederick William Faber

Dear God,

Yesterday Thornton and I walked down to get the mail. For the end of December it was an oddly mild day—record breaking, in fact, with temps in the Fifties. Much of the snow had already melted, and the driveway was squishy beneath my heavy winter boots and my companion's wide feet. So, instead, we chose a path through the upper gardens, across the mottled lawn sprinkled with deer leavings, through the maze of dirt mounds pushed up by the pocket gophers. The reposing gardens were black with the moisture of melted snow.

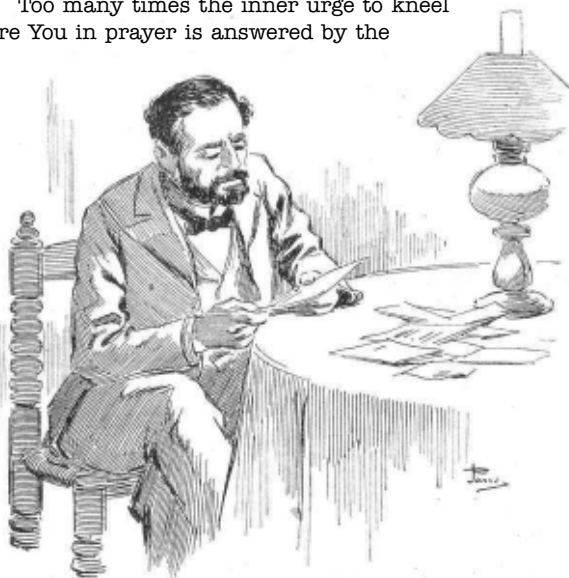
Thornton trotted alongside, his iron-gray bulk heavy against the ground, his long fur billowing in the stiff breeze that came out of the north and west. Every so often he would stop to listen—maybe to the tittering cardinals nesting in the row of conifers, maybe to the excavating of the gophers going on beneath our feet, maybe just to the wind whistling past his ears.

Those sounds audible to the human ear I heard as well—many more than would normally be available on a winter's day; typically I would be so wrapped up against the cold that the only sounds would be the scrape of wool against the ear and the beating of my own heart. But then, if only Thornton can hear the scrapings of subterranean burrowing, only I can hear the scrapings of Your Spirit. If we can share the sensation of the wind shooting down upon us from the plains, of the two of us only I can feel the gentle touch of the Wind coming down from heaven.

Father, quite often I find my pleasure in just thinking about You, meditating on You, letting Your Spirit pass in and out, swim through all my senses. These quiet, unformed thoughts seem to fit the rounds and recesses of my own spirit, weaving themselves gently into the folds of my life, keeping this gravity-bound dwelling focused upon You.

Yet I'm coming to know that these steady, percolating moments can never be a replacement for a well-ordered and specific conversation with You, Father. The vibrations of communion, while sweet, are not the same as the words of prayer. The two exist separately, filling two distinct needs.

Too many times the inner urge to kneel before You in prayer is answered by the



lazy shrug, the answer that since You know all about me, inside and out, then audible words are not necessary. And, if only for a moment, I believe the lie that a brief quiver from the joining of our spirits will suffice.

But it will not. Woven throughout Your word is the clear evidence that You are a God of details, of specifics. When the servant of Abraham was sent to obtain a wife for Isaac he was quite specific when he prayed to you at the well at Nahor:

Then he prayed, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. May it be that when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar that I may have a drink,' and she says, 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master." Genesis 24:12-14

And Your answer to the servant's prayer was as specific as his request:

Before he had finished praying, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder. She was the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, who was the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor. The girl was very beautiful, a virgin; no man had ever lain with her. She went down to the spring, filled her jar and came up again. The servant hurried to meet her and said, "Please give me a little water from your jar." "Drink, my lord," she said, and quickly lowered the jar to her hands and gave him a drink. After she had given him a drink, she said, "I'll draw water for your camels too, until they have finished drinking." Genesis 24:15-19

And when Jesus was asked by His disciples how they should pray to You, instead of answering with a shrug—"Oh, just think about Him once in a while, that's all."—He said:

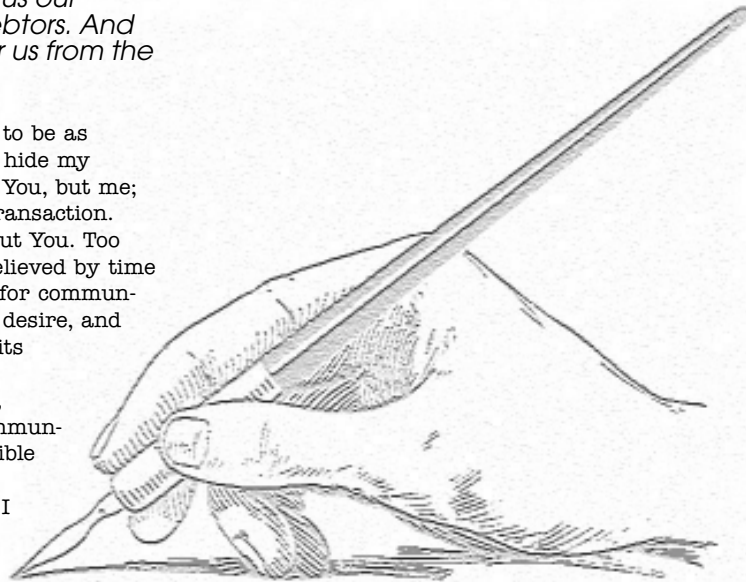
"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom

come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." Matthew 6:9-13

Father, I want my communion with You to be as complete as You wish. And I won't pretend to hide my selfish motives: My doing so will not improve You, but me; the benefit will be realized at my end of the transaction.

Too many of my days have begun without You. Too many of my troubled nights have passed unrelieved by time spent with You. But when my spirit cries out for communion with Yours, the flesh overwhelms its holy desire, and the gravity of earth pulls me back down into its clutches.

Maybe the answer lies in Your Son. You, Father, are Spirit, but Jesus was flesh. As communion between those of flesh must be more tangible and specific than that between spirits, so my communion with Jesus could differ from that I have with You. If I but pray—as Your word repeatedly instructs me—to You *through* the Lord Jesus, then I will have the advantage of communing with You by way of One who has experienced the restrictions of flesh, someone who knows what it is like to yearn deeply for another so high above this gravity-bound plane. ☒



Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:14-16 nkjv

Teach me to pray, Lord, teach me to pray;
This is my heart-cry, day unto day;
I long to know Thy will and Thy way;
Teach me to pray, Lord, teach me to pray.

Power in prayer, Lord, power in prayer,
Here 'mid earth's sin and sorrow and care;
Men lost and dying, souls in despair;
O give me power, power in prayer!

My weakened will, Lord Thou canst renew;
My sinful nature Thou canst subdue;
Fill me just now with power anew,
Power to pray and power to do!

Living in Thee, Lord, and Thou in me;
Constant abiding, this is my plea;
Grant me Thy power, boundless and free:
Power with men and power with Thee.

Albert S. Reitz

Dear God,

As I look out onto a rather ordinary new day, one very much like the few days that have gone before, I wonder why everyone has gotten so exercised over this new year. Why have millennial zealots camped out on the Mount of Olives so as to hold a front row seat when (as they imagine) Christ marches through the Golden Gate at the strike of midnight? Why have survivalists doubled even their normally exorbitant supply of food and water in preparation for cataclysmic meltdown? Why have otherwise intelligent people resolved to usher in the year 2000 by crouching huddled in a closet with a flashlight and an extra case of D cells?

Why is it so difficult for some people to find and read and understand what Jesus said to His disciples:

"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him." Matthew 24:36,44

Father, only You know the day and hour when Christ will return to conduct us away from this peculiar way station. I want to commit the remainder of my time—however brief or lengthy it may be—to living every day as if Jesus will arrive in just the next moment *and* as if He will not return before I am planted into the ground.

By Your grace, I want to live every day according to Your word, rather than by the fickle dictates of a world gone mad. At the same time, I don't want to abuse Your word. I don't want to selectively use it only for my immediate advantage.

- When confronted by stupidity or wrong, I don't want to absolve my quick temper with the handy excuse that Jesus Himself got angry at the temple moneychangers.
- When people reject what I have to say, I don't want to think of them as swine, and all my words as pearls.
- When faced with an unrelenting ailment or persistent sin, I don't want to rationalize it with the easy reminder that the apostle Paul never shook his.
- When I'd rather be alone, I don't want to excuse bad manners with the fact that Jesus liked to get away as well.
- When my brain is tired, I don't want to think of You and Your word as an irritating distraction; when my mind is bright I don't want to blithely ignore You as someone unnecessary.
- When I fail to understand Your word, I don't want to too quickly dismiss it as just another of Your 'mysteries' that I'll not grasp while walking this mortal plane.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself... Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. Luke 24:27,45

As I sit here at my desk, the low-angle winter sun pierces sharply through the south window. The beam of light cuts across the wood of the desktop, the keyboard, my moving fingers. Everything in its path is brilliantly illuminated and defined. The strong, crisp light reveals every crevice and whorl, every cut and healed wound, every scrape and callous of my hand. It reveals with alarming clarity the age spots, and with more pleasant light the hand's symmetry and strength.

Father, as I turn the calendar page to move into another year, I want to know You with this same clarity. As much as You care to reveal, I want to learn; as much of Yourself that You open to this fragile mind and lowly spirit, I want to grasp and examine and clutch tightly as I would any cherished possession.

But, Father, that can only be the beginning, for the deeper life is not just the knowledge of, but the *acting out* of Your truth. The acquisition of knowledge is simple narcissism, if that's where it ends. Looking into Your word is little better than staring into my own reflection if I do nothing with that knowledge.

If the rest of the world is all agog over what they imagine to be the New Millenium, then I want to be just as excited over this fresh opportunity to learn from You, to listen to You, to obey You, and to be counted among those who reverently and steadily call upon Your name. ☒

Let all our employment be to know GOD: the more one knows Him, the more one desires to know Him. And as knowledge is commonly the measure of love, the deeper and more extensive our knowledge shall be, the greater will be our love: and if our love of GOD were great we should love Him equally in pains and pleasures.

Let us not amuse ourselves to seek or to love GOD for any sensible favors (however elevated) which He has or may do us. Such favors, though never so great, cannot bring us so near to GOD as faith does in one simple act.

Let us seek Him often by faith: He is within us; seek Him not elsewhere. Are we not rude and deserve blame, if we leave Him alone, to busy ourselves about trifles, which do not please Him and perhaps offend Him? 'Tis to be feared these trifles will one day cost us dearly.

Let us begin to be devoted to Him in good earnest. Let us cast everything besides out of our hearts; He would possess them alone. Beg this favor of Him. If we do what we can on our parts, we shall soon see that change wrought in us which we aspire after. Brother Lawrence



Aspects

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