

Progress

How am I doing, God?

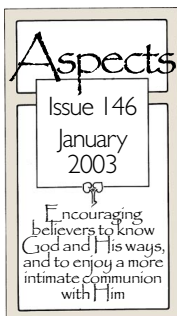
We've just finished Christmas down here—the reason for which is Your doing, while what it has become is ours.

We've opened our gifts, and the tree is drying out. The candles have burned down, and the little nativity set is gathering dust. All of which means that the New Year approaches.

There's really nothing special about the transition from one year to the next. There's nothing magical about the stroke of midnight on December 31st; it's just one 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 children inevitably grow up and grow older, usually maturing as they pass from child to adult, so too should I be steadily 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 am growing, maturing in Your ways. I wonder if I'm growing up. My long-held 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 are not to be a trophy, set into a padlocked glass case, but a living, breathing Spirit who has dominion over every corner of my life.

So, Father, at this close of another year I have come to talk it over with You—to ask... *How am I doing?*



A Thorough Examination

OUR CHRISTMAS WAS BROWN THIS YEAR. Though appropriately bitter cold, there was not a speck of white to be found around our home as the gray dawn light seeped in to replace the darkness of the eve. Then, a few hours later, as if to heckle us for expecting something of Currier and Ives, the clouds sent down a wispy salting of white, almost invisible, and barely sufficient to coat the ice of the dramatically diminished pond.

What with it being so dry during the end of summer, 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 is with high anticipation that each winter I scan the northwest horizon, awaiting that arctic blast that will convert the western moisture into snow. But, alas, this year the errant jet stream has brought us no moisture to fall from the sky.

In more normal years I would rise before dawn (when only the birds have wakened from their slumber) to plow the fresh snow from the drive—a task made easier by the new beauty surrounding 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—only 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 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 to inspection.

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 begins 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 niv



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

*The world that looks so dull all day
Glow 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 ruffings of the sea;
The deeper depth is out of reach
To all, my God, but Thee.*

(Frederick William Faber)

Who You Are

IT'S NOT ONLY ON DECEMBER 31ST, when the fourth digit of the year's chronometer rolls over, that I pause before the expanse of Your limitless ribbon of time. At various moments throughout the year I am struck again by Your unbounded power, and the scope of Your investment in this earth.

It is a dizzying sensation to lean back in my chair and to contemplate the full width and breadth of what we as believers 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 it would be set. (That moment is "dark," of course, only for us who were then 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 SUV. 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 who he is.

Just so, we are part of Your nature.

Well-ordered Communion

THE OTHER DAY THORNTON AND I WALKED DOWN TO get the mail. For the end of December it was an oddly mild day, with the temperature spring-like. 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 still thatched with autumn's dried weeds.

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. Normally 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 scratchings of subterranean burrowing, only I can hear the whisperings of Your Spirit. While we may 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 and 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 thought 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 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 niv

Father, I want my communion with You to be as complete as You wish. And I won't pretend to hide my selfish motives: Improving our communion will not improve You in the least, 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.

Perhaps 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.

*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)

Every Day with You

AS I LOOK OUT ONTO A RATHER ORDINARY NEW DAY, one very much like the few days that have gone before, I wonder, again, why so many people get so exercised about a new year. Why do crowds fill the common places with revelry and drunken noise? And why do the strange among us proclaim each page-turn into a new year the moment in which all will come crashing down around our ears? 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 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 insurmountable task; when my mind is bright I don't want to blithely ignore You as someone irrelevant.

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 agog over another new year, 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.



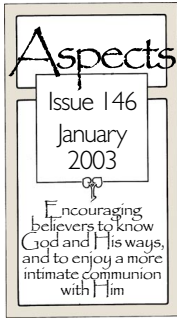
LET ALL OUR EMPLOYMENT BE TO KNOW GOD: THE MORE ONE KNOWS HIM, THE MORE ONE DESIRES TO KNOW HIM. AND AS KNOWLEDGE IS COMMONLY THE MEASURE OF LOVE, THE DEEPER AND MORE EXTENSIVE OUR KNOWLEDGE SHALL BE, THE GREATER WILL BE OUR LOVE: AND IF OUR LOVE OF GOD WERE GREAT WE SHOULD LOVE HIM EQUALLY IN PAINS 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)



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E-mail address: aspects@dlampel.com
Postal address: 2462 195th Trail, Winterset, IA 50273-8172
Phone: 515-462-1971

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