

Falling for God

Saying Yes
to His Extravagant Proposal

Gary W. Moon



SHAW BOOKS
an imprint of WATERBROOK PRESS

Falling for God

A SHAW BOOK

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS

2375 Telstar Drive, Suite 160

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920

A division of Random House, Inc.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the *King James Version*. Scripture quotations marked (MSG) are taken from *The Message*. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Portions of “Plato’s Cave” in chapter 2, “Becoming Open to Love,” appeared in a different version in *Homesick for Eden* by Gary Moon, copyright © 1997, published by Servant Publications. Portions of the story about Regina in the conclusion, “Say Yes to God’s Extravagant Proposal,” appeared in a different version in *Homesick for Eden* by Gary Moon, copyright © 1997, published by Servant Publications. Portions of the introduction, “Misplaced Passions,” appeared in a slightly different version in *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation*, Spring 2003, 48-50. Portions of “Dancin’ Boy” in chapter 2, “Becoming Open to Love,” appeared in a slightly different version in *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation*, Spring 2003, 71-2.

ISBN 0-87788-076-X

Copyright © 2004 by Gary Moon

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

SHAW BOOKS and its aspen leaf logo are trademarks of WaterBrook Press, a division of Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moon, Gary W., 1956–

Falling for God : saying yes to his extravagant proposal / by Gary W. Moon.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-87788-076-X

1. Spiritual life—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4501.3.M65 2004

248.4—dc22

2003021756

Printed in the United States of America

2004—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Foreword by Dallas Willard	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction: <i>Misplaced Passions</i>	1

1 The Three Cs of Lasting Love	7
<i>Conversation, Communion, and Consummation</i>	

Part 1: Conversation

Talking to God Without Losing Your Mind

2 Becoming Open to Love	29
<i>Understanding the Kingdom of God</i>	
3 Deciding to “Go Steady”	47
<i>Practicing the Presence of God</i>	
4 Learning to Listen	68
<i>How to Hear God’s Voice</i>	
Hanging Out with God—All the Time	89
<i>Frank Laubach</i>	

Part 2: Communion

It’s Not Just for Sunday Anymore

5 Saying Yes to Fidelity	95
<i>Turning Away from Other Loves</i>	

Contents

6 Fear of Total Commitment 112
How Communion Exposes My False Self

7 Surrender Hurts 131
The Sweet Ache of Letting Go

Living Out of the Divine Center 149
Thomas R. Kelly

Part 3: Consummation
Christ Incarnate in Me

8 Forgiveness 155
The Importance of Staying Connected to Love

9 Reconciliation 173
Awakening to the Desire to Be United with God Forever

10 Union with God 190
Less of Me, More of Him

One Woman’s Pursuit of Union with God 209
Teresa of Avila

Conclusion: *Say Yes to God’s Extravagant Proposal* 212

Notes 219



Falling

Saying Yes

to His Extravagant Proposal

for God

GARY W. MOON

Foreword

This book is about life lived in constant, close contact with God, a life in which “Look, I am always with you”—as said by Jesus to his friends—becomes a day-to-day reality. It is about real life lived now in the kingdom of heaven.

Such a life will never be imposed upon us, nor will it occur automatically. It doesn't just happen to us, no matter how many wonderful church services we may attend. Though it is a gift, it does not come to those who are passive. It comes only in response to intelligent, informed, purposive, sustained, and interactive relationship with Jesus now living in our world. That is why we are directed to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Persistent, strenuous, and well-directed action is required.

To that end, we need *information*: specific, down-to-earth directions on what to do. We need *imagination*: pictures and stories of what we will encounter along the path of growing to know Jesus better. We need *persistence*: the will to consistently stick to and apply the means to our goal. We need *patience*: a willingness to let the life we are living grow and take the wise course. And we need *realism*: a clear eye and a confidence that it's safe and necessary to call things by their true name.

These attributes are not readily come by in our world or in our religious circles. Images of “success” all around us run in the opposite direction. American religious history and practice is tied to a revivalist tradition, full of magic figures and magic moments. How many announcements and advertisements have you recently heard that promise “life-changing” or “life-transforming” services or programs? If a significant portion of these actually came true, we would by now have nothing for policemen to do.

As a result, many people cease to believe that life can be transformed, that we really can put off the old person and put on the new person, which is the character of Christ. They settle for a life that is no different from that of other “good people,” plus heaven when they die. Or they throw over the whole project of Christlikeness, possibly allowing it may be for some people but not for them.

Here this book can help. Rich in biblical and psychological understanding, it brings the dearest treasures of the Christian spiritual life within reach of the serious contemporary apprentice of Jesus in kingdom living. You will have to sit with it, stew in it—in short make it a priority and a project. (“Seek *first* the his kingdom and his righteousness,” you may recall.) (Matthew 6:33). But if you do, you will certainly come to know what it means to grow—steadily, reliably—in grace. Grace is actually God acting in our lives to accomplish, with our participation, what we cannot accomplish on our own. This is eternal life now, a life of interactive relationship that leaves neither the here nor the hereafter in doubt.

Falling for God is charmingly honest and rich in content and illustrations. Gary Moon sees into the soul and then deftly shows how to unsnarl the lines of communication and influence that open us up to God. His gentle and humorous style will hold you close but convey the deepest spiritual lessons at the same time. He shows us that the best way to become like Jesus and be at home in his kingdom is by entering into a journey with him, a transformational excursion of conversation, communion, and consummation.

—DALLAS WILLARD

Misplaced Passions

As I sit down to write this book, a question that has been waving for my attention for more than two decades races to center stage and grabs the microphone: If Jesus came to turn our world right-side up, why do so many of his followers continue to live such upside-down lives? Why do I?

If Jesus came to our planet so that all who would listen could be restored to relationship with the Father and enjoy the heavenly emotions of love, joy, and peace, why do Christians commonly feel as if we are alone in the world and burdened by the earthbound feelings of anger, depression, and anxiety?

Do you ever feel that no matter how hard you try or how much you desire it, the bountiful life Jesus promised continues to elude you? If you do, the solution may not be as simple as ducking into the nearest church for assistance. In the words of Dallas Willard, the Christian church does not provide a coherent curriculum for finding and experiencing abundant life. If it did, church growth consultants and psychologists would have gone the way of telegraph operators. Yet both vocations are booming, as indispensable as e-mail.

But why? Why do so few Christians actually enjoy and celebrate the good news—the abundant life promised by Jesus? Why is it only the saints who have taken Christianity 101? Or in the words of one of Walker Percy's characters in *The Second Coming*, "If the good news is true, why is no one pleased to hear it?"

I'll cut to the chase. *I believe that ninety-nine out of a hundred Christians rarely enjoy the rich life that Christ promised; they live, instead, lives of silent resignation.* If you are with the one, slide this book back on the shelf. You don't need it. But if you are like me, among the ninety-nine, then this book is for you.

Together we're going to explore how we can enter into a process of spiritual formation that will result in the forming of the life and character of Christ within the heart. It's all about being willing to fall in love.

A REAL STORY

For a number of months, while practicing as a psychologist, I met weekly with a young man in his early thirties. He was painfully shy and tormented by anxiety. More than anything in the world, Dave wanted to find a wife. He dreamed of being with a special person for conversation, communion, and union.

Dave's relationship history was almost a blank page. Except for writing about the pain of rejection, it was.

He had been turned down for dates so many times he eventually quit asking. It had been seventeen years since he had gotten his driver's license—an event he fantasized would signal more dating opportunities—but he'd only experienced a woman (other than his mother) sitting in the passenger seat two times. Neither had said yes to a second outing.

Not long before Dave began meeting with me, a "friend" of his had suggested that he satisfy his need for company with the opposite sex by going to a bar where scantily clad women would bring him a drink, and, for additional money, would become even scantier before his eyes.

Dave was hooked after one visit and became a regular. Money was not a problem for him. Intimacy was the problem, and it became easy for him to confuse the presence of a woman, meaningless banter, and seminudity with relationship.

Here's the truly unsettling thing. I believe Dave's experiences bear a remarkable similarity to the way many Christians relate to God, which may explain why so many of us become dissatisfied with our relationship with him. We attend church at about the same frequency Dave was visiting bars. We've enjoyed brief encounters with God and have had moments of spiritual excite-

ment. But these experiences have never led to a real relationship of meaningful conversation, intimate communion, or union. Like Dave, we have experienced flirtation but not fact, words but not dialogue, promises but not commitment, and ultimately, distance instead of communion. Given our approach, union with God is less likely than getting a good snow cone in hell.

I hope I've not offended you, but I believe this image is very important. I believe it captures how many of us do church—momentary encounters with God instead of the development of a deep and lasting relationship with someone we can take home to meet Mom. Christian spiritual formation and the experience of abundant living can only happen as we fall head over heels in love with God.

GOD'S ABSURD INVITATION

God has offered us an incredible invitation to enter into intimate relationship with himself. Relationship. Loving connection with the One who sketched out the first atom, hung the stars without string, and crafted your soul with greater love than your mom felt as she knitted your first booties. Connection with the One who loves you with the romantic love of a groom for his bride.

Romantic? Yes. God's desire for love is stronger than your own, and his use of loving imagery in describing it is enough to make a bartender blush. The foreshadowing backdrop to Jesus' first miracle is a week-long wedding celebration in Cana. He leaves his apprentices with the charge to become one with the Father, and he calls the church his bride and himself the Groom. A bride invited to be at the greatest wedding celebration in the history of the universe, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.¹

It boggles the mind. Why would God want to develop a loving relationship with me? What do I have to offer him that he doesn't already have at 10⁴⁰? What's in it for him? This can't be right! Even my spouse and kids need a break from being with me. Could the Creator of heaven and earth really desire to be

my friend? my lover? closer than newlyweds on their honeymoon night? And forever and ever? Wow!

It's difficult for me to wrap my brain around the fact that I am not just saved *from* but *to*, that I'm saved to restored intimacy with God. With salvation comes an invitation to join in with the Trinity as part of their eternal community of love. And with it the offer to enjoy intimate fellowship that surpasses what is possible in the best of marriages.

But it is far too easy to become distracted from our journey into intimacy with God. Sometimes heady questions get in the way. What would Jesus do? or eat? or think? Would Jesus buy an Oldsmobile or a Toyota? Would he drink Pepsi or wine? Would he think about politics or religion? Who knows? Are these the questions we should be asking? I don't think so, because they allow us to appreciate Jesus from a distance, or as a belief system, instead of as a live-in, twenty-four-hour-a-day intimate friend.

The better question, the real question, is: How will I *be* as Jesus lives his life through me? Jesus, not sitting on a throne in heaven, but here with me in the muck and mire of life, here with me as an intimate companion—incarnate once again, but this time *in* me as the lover of my soul, who never leaves to go to the mall or to watch a football game.

With this staggering possibility, however, comes a sobering observation. Most marriages to Christ never get consummated. Most never experience the joy of union. Why? I believe it's because we fail to pursue him with the same reckless abandon with which we chased (or will chase) our spouse. We settle for brief encounters instead of intimate dialogue and become content with the contract instead of enjoying communion. Or perhaps the notion of viewing God in a romantic way frightens us, as does the possibility of losing the boundary of our self in the ocean of his love.

I pray this book creates in you a desire and willingness to take the time to fall hopelessly in love with God, so that you might experience the union you were created to enjoy.

GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

What's the big idea behind this book? It's simply this: Restoration of the soul—change that leads to abundant life in Christ and the emotions of love, joy, and peace—happens as we cultivate a passionate relationship with God. So this is a romance novel of sorts, but without the wind-blown couple on the cover.

In the pages that follow I attempt to explore what it means to fall head over heels in love with God and to offer a potpourri of practical suggestions for how we can invite God to make real changes in our lives through the experience of his love. So you won't just think I'm a hopeless idealist, at the end of the three sections, I introduce you to a person who did what we are talking about in this book. Because these three people fell head over heels in love with God, their lives were incredibly transformed.

I wrote this book with the hope that it can be experienced at different levels and different speeds. Each chapter presents a particular theme of spiritual formation relevant to growing an ever-deepening relationship with God. If you are looking for a story-filled, curl-up-by-the-fireplace book, I think you'll find that here.

If you want to slow down and experience this book, I've included some exercises at the end of each chapter that target your head, heart, body, and soul.

- *For Your Head—A Bible Study.* At the conclusion of each chapter you will find a Bible study that will take you to Scripture for the purpose of delving more deeply into the chapter theme. These studies can be used for either private devotion or small group study.
- *For Your Heart—Personal Meditations.* These reflections on the chapter themes will prompt interaction with the historic model of transformation, which includes: *purgation* (releasing our hold on the world), *illumination* (growing realization of the power and presence of God), and *union* (a growing experiential understanding of the mystery of “Christ-in-me”).

- *For Body and Soul—Classic Spiritual Exercises.* One or more classic spiritual exercises intended to help you experience the Christian formation theme presented in the chapter.

If you do these activities, they can provide you with a deeper experience of the material covered in the chapter. Or you may simply think of them as suggestions of what to do on a date with God.

Enough introducing. Let's turn our attention to the three Cs of a lasting love with God—*conversation, communion, and consummation*. As you journey toward union, don't be surprised if the world begins to look right-side up.

The Three Cs of Lasting Love

Conversation, Communion, and Consummation

We were made to live in his perfect love, we were meant to walk in his grace. And we'll never feel we are home again until we see him face to face.

CLAIRE CLONINGER

As surely as a fish is designed to feel at home in water, you were crafted for a particular environment. You were uniquely designed to be at home in the ocean of God's love. Your soul was made for connection to God and others. Somewhere deep inside, you know that, and perhaps sometimes you feel a twinge of homesickness for the life God created you to have.

We don't have to flip through many pages of Scripture before bumping into the fact that each of us is very special to God. He made us in his own image. Because he is a community of compassion, love is our natural habitat. He wired us to feel at home in a place like the Garden of Eden, which literally means "pleasure" or "delight." He programmed each of us for intimate connection.

Adam and Eve fell from grace and into an unnatural habitat, like fish trying to swim in a forest. If we listen in silence, we can almost hear their cry as it echoes through time. (Or is it coming from our own hearts?) Nothing awakens the deepest feelings of terror like the experience of separation from love.

Ever since the Fall, every human heart has experienced a longing to go

home, to live in love with God and one another. Jesus knew that. He came to earth with the wonderful news that God invites us to come home. He has opened wide the gate to Eden. He's banished the guards, freshly manicured the grounds, kicked out the snakes.

Jesus referred to our garden home as "the kingdom." He told everyone that the laws that govern the land are pure and simple: Live in love with God and one another until your heart beats as one with the Trinity.

Yes, you have been invited back home and to a wedding. To your home. To your wedding. But it won't be a shotgun affair. God has been very patient in his love through the milleniums. He knows that it will take some time to get to know him and for trust to be earned. He knows that we will need to develop our relationship with him the same way all romantic relationships progress.

While our journey begins with salvation, we will fall deeply in love with God as we get to know him through taking the time for *conversation*, becoming honest enough for true *communion*, and ultimately, trusting his desire for *consummation* and surrendering to it. The road that goes back home stops at a wedding chapel.

Why is this important? Because most of us don't take the time to walk this less-traveled road, the path of true intimacy, oneness, and union in our relationship with God. Most do not realize that these three Cs—conversation, communion, and consummation—are the only route that leads to soul transformation and the experience of life in full.

TRANSFORMING CONVERSATION REQUIRES TIME

I think you would've liked Howard and Nellie—my wife's grandparents. They fell in love as teenagers in the mountains of western Virginia, and they stayed that way for more than sixty years.

Howard was a barber. He cut hair and shaved faces at a little shop on Main Street nestled between a soda joint with marble counters and the only movie

theater in town. Best I can figure, Howard sculpted about a quarter of a million heads and went through enough hair tonic to fill an oil tanker. Nellie stayed home and poured love into their four children and about five thousand red-velvet cakes.

Whenever Howard wasn't mowing hair—or the four acres of grass that grew on their riverfront lot—he was with Nellie. The only thing that ever separated them was his work. Other than that, they spent all their time together.

Three times a week, for over sixty years, they sat together in church, second row from the front, left side, holding hands. Seven nights a week they knelt together for prayers. Every day, they shared at least two meals.

Their marriage was for better or for worse. And it was mostly for better, until Nellie got older and began to lose her sight. But even that made them closer. Howard retired from barbering, bought her a phone with numbers the size of their great-grandchildren, took over the cooking, and sat even closer to Nellie in church—holding her by the arm instead of her hand. He was her light.

But then Howard died.

Nellie moved into a personal-care facility. Even with frequent visits from her children and grandchildren, her gray world became darker and sadder. It was hard to get her to eat. She became as weak as a newborn kitten.

One day, after months of waiting for Howard to walk back into the room, the rail-thin woman who hardly had the strength to open her eyes, bolted up in bed and declared in a strong voice, “Look at those people! They’ve got flowers all over them. They’re smiling. Aren’t they beautiful?”

Then she lay back down and died.

Some thought Howard had sent some of his new angel friends to go and get her, take her by the arm, and walk her back to his place. Others *knew* that’s what happened. There would be no separating those two.

Not long after Nellie’s death, I heard a song on the radio while driving to work that made me think about the love she and Howard had and now have again. Mind you, I don’t listen to country music. But every so often some radio

gnomes sneak into my car and change the settings. Anyway, the chorus described a couple much like Howard and Nellie. After a lifetime of being together, the wife finally died. Her husband found a note she had written years before. She wanted him to know that if she got to heaven before he did, she'd wait for him to finish his chores and join her. The final two lines were:

And between now and then, till I see you again,
I'll be loving you. Love, me.

Some may think Howard and Nellie were too close, enmeshed. Perhaps. But I don't think so. I think those two lovers were intertwined in a wonderful way. Like the members of the Trinity, they had become a community of constant companionship.

As the devotion masters tell us, our journey of transformation into Christ-likeness begins as we become willing to take the *time* to practice the presence of God and engage in soul-healing conversation. Developing a relationship with God is similar to developing a relationship like the one Nellie and Howard had with each other. No, it's exactly like that.

Howard and Nellie were a couple of ordinary mountain folks who "got it." They discovered a simple secret and acted on it—to realize the true value of the other and spend enormous amounts of time together.

Transforming love requires time and a vision of forever. At least until the flowery people come to walk us back to our garden home. That's the first requirement for falling head-over-heels in love with God. Now for the second.

COMMUNION BEGINS WITH HONESTY

Sharon's exclusive subdivision borders the desert. Her spacious home overlooks a picture-perfect golf course where her husband plays each day. Together they share a five-star world of fancy restaurants, afternoon tea at the club, and silk

pillowcases. It's a long way from Howard and Nellie's world of Denny's, sweet tea in jelly glasses, and flannel pajamas.

Sharon's well-decorated home could appear on the pages of *Better Homes and Gardens*. The walls and tabletops witness that her husband is a successful businessman, and she is a popular writer and speaker. Most of her writing and speaking has been about God.

When I met her, Sharon's life was buffed and polished—at least on the outside. But on the inside, in the parts of her soul visible only to her and God, she often felt tarnished, unsuccessful, and afraid. Down deep was a chasm of anxiety and, at times, desperate loneliness. It was a pit in her soul so deep that she could fill it with trophies, books, a good husband, model children, and a picture-perfect life.

In spite of all Sharon had accomplished, in spite of always playing by the rules of external perfection, and in spite of all the words she had crafted about God's love, she often felt a dull ache that applause could not medicate. "This can't be all there is," she said as a mantra.

Then one day, while sitting in a seminar, she heard a song that she knew was written just for her, a song about the hole in the soul. A song about being homesick for a place you have never been before but want desperately to go.

Homesick for Eden*

A garden so green where water ran clean
And the animals roamed without names

Love was a girl who walked through the world
Where passion was pure as a flame

* Grateful acknowledgment is made for use of the lyrics to "Homesick for Eden," by Claire Cloninger/Paul Smith, © 1989 Word Music, LLC. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

In the back of our minds is a time before time
And a sad irreversible fact
We can't seem to think why we left there
And we can't seem to find our way back

All of us are homesick for Eden
We yearn to return to a land we've never known

Deep is the need to go back to the garden
A burning so strong for a place we belong
A place that we know is home

Have you ever just cried for no reason why
Like a child that's been left on it's own

You can't quite explain the confusion or pain
So you live with the heartache alone

In the back of your mind is a place and a time
And an image of what should have been

And you know that you'll never be happy
Until you find your way back there again

All of us are homesick for Eden
We yearn to return to a land we've never known

Deep is the need to go back to the garden
A burning so strong for a place we belong
A place that we know is home

We were made to live in his perfect love
We were meant to walk in his grace
And we'll never feel we are home again
Until we see him face to face

Deep is our need to go back to the garden,
A burning so strong for a place we belong
To rest at his feet in fellowship sweet
A place we know is home

When Sharon heard those words, she wanted to do something she had not tried before. She became ruthlessly honest with God. She told him that while she had admired him, she had never truly and recklessly loved him. She told him she had purposely kept him at arm's length for fear that he would either reject her or ask for more than she could give. And she even told him that she had harbored anger at him for not rescuing her from the abuse she suffered as a child.

And then, at the end of what turned into two days of crying, she asked him if he would reopen the gates of Eden, just for her, so she could step inside and live life the way he intended, in constant and loving relationship with him.

It took a lot of desperation for Sharon to say all that. But she did. And now, years later, she's still as sure as anything that God rewarded her honesty by saying yes as he pushed open the gate and took her by the hand.

Like Howard and Nellie, Sharon experienced a secret of transformation. Real change requires honesty about where we are right now and where we want to be. That's the second requirement for falling for God: to get real, to be totally honest about our predicament. There is nothing we can *achieve* that will fill the God-shaped void in the center of the soul. The smartest thing we can do is to lift our hands, like a small child wanting to be picked up by a parent,

and say, “Help, me God. I’m lost and alone. Please pick me up. Hold me in your arms and tell me everything is going to be all right.”

The third requirement for soul change can be the most difficult of all.

TRUSTING IN GOD’S DESIRE FOR INTIMACY

Fortunately, we are not the only ones who get homesick for the intimacy of Eden. God gets homesick too. Richard Foster begins his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* with the following words:

God has graciously allowed me to catch a glimpse into his heart, and I want to share with you what I have seen. Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupations. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with much-ness and many-ness. He longs for our presence.

And he is inviting you—and me—to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in.¹

I’ve read and reread those words at least a hundred times. Even as I typed them, I felt a lump in my throat and a simultaneous sense of both disbelief and hope.

Could it be that the Creator of the entire universe aches with anticipation that I might return home to his presence? Could he really be facing in my direction with outstretched arms, calling my name, waving for me to come back home?

Yes, the most real part of me whispers and then suggests that the story of

the prodigal son is the best image we have for the love of God. Let's consider these familiar words again, but this time, from the father's perspective.

You know the story by heart. The younger of two sons says to his father, in effect, "I wish you were dead so I could spend my inheritance."

The father doesn't punish the boy. Instead he divides his property between his two sons, sells half, and gives the money to the prodigal. The boy packs his bags and heads off to experience the world.

And experience it he does. He leaves no sensual craving unattended. It does not take him long to squander the entire inheritance. He is left penniless as a famine sweeps the country.

He signs on with a farmer who gives him the job of slopping pigs. By this point the prodigal is so hungry he would have eaten the corn cobs in the pig slop, but no one will give him any.

In time the boy comes to his senses and recalls that even the farmhands working for his father sit down for three meals a day. So he swallows his pride and sets out to return home. He thinks, *I'll tell him I know I've sinned against him and God. I'll say, "I'm not fit to be called your son. But please take me on as a hired hand."*

Let's listen to how Luke describes what happens next.

When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: "Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again."

But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, "Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!" And they began to have a wonderful time. (Luke 15:20-24, MSG, emphasis added)

There. Did you see it? The moment when the father isn't listening? Incredible! How can that be? Simple. He is completely distracted by his pounding heart—pounding at the possibility of a restored relationship with the one he so dearly loves. The joy of his child's presence makes the father deaf to further confession and blind to the pig slop on the boy's face.

And notice this. In the verse before this story, Jesus says that God, the Father in the story he is about to tell, is so much in love with his children—with you—that he throws a party with his angels every time one lost soul returns home.²

Yes, if you've already left your personal pigpen of self-sufficiency, you have been the cause of a heavenly bash. Heaven partied the day you said, "Enough, I was wrong to try to be God. I've made a mess of my life. I want to apologize and go home."

And then, before you had time to arrive, there he was, your heavenly Father, scanning the horizon, looking for a sign that you were coming back. And when he saw you—a speck in the distance—he broke into a run, so undignified for a patriarch, and hugged you as you tried futilely to explain. He was too distracted by his excitement to listen. Did you feel it? Do you want to feel it now?

Because I know this story is timeless, I can confess to God and to you that my soul is darkly stained by the choice of Adam and Eve. I've made the same wrong choice, and continue to make it, hundreds of times each day. Even though I've read the script written by the prodigal son, I continue to play his role myself. And as if this weren't bad enough, I've accepted the forgiveness of my heavenly Father, felt his embrace, only to get up the next morning, pack my bags, and leave again and again and again. Maybe seventy times seven. Maybe more. Over and over I choose control, perfectionism, drive for success, and myself over trust, acceptance, enjoyment of the present moment, and God.

Yet I sense that I am loved—in this very moment—beyond what my mind can possibly contain. Not only is my homesickness for loving community a homing device that calls to my soul, but also, I truly believe, God is homesick

for me, and desires to spend endless amounts of his time with me, talking with me, and just being with me for the joy of relationship. In this I place my hope—in his desire for intimacy with me.

I want to confess again, “I’ve eaten from the wrong tree. I’ve returned to the slop of self-rule.” I’m saying it out loud. But my Father isn’t listening to me. His heart is pounding too loudly with anticipation of my return.

What kind of love is this? A love stronger than my fear and arrogance. Eventually I will become so transformed by his desire for relationship that I will want to stay home forever. I will feel the change of inner transformation. Even now the slop of independence and self-rule looks more like slop, and a relationship to God, like the pearl of great price.

God, my Daddy, is Fall-proofing my soul for all eternity by his desire for intimacy, his delirious love, and his offer of relationship. He wants to hug me so tightly that we become one and I never again choose to run. He wants the same for you.

Transformation is a process of falling in love with God. It requires three things: time for *conversation*, honesty that leads to *communion*, and trust that God’s desire for *consummation* will not be thwarted. Our deepest desires are amplified in the pounding heart of God and will lead us from the presence of pigs to union with him.

LET’S BE PRACTICAL: THE CRUMBS AND BUBBLES OF CHANGE

For most of us the incremental journey back to falling in love with God can resemble the winding loops of a toy Slinky more than a straight line. Because of this, it’s important to develop an appreciation for small changes.

A story by Safed the Sage helps me understand this. William E. Barton was one of America’s preeminent clergymen. He wrote more than sixty books, and his influence was able to leapfrog denominational boundaries. During the last fifteen years of his life he wrote a series of parables using the pen name Safed

the Sage. The genius of these stories rested in Safed's ability to find timeless truth in daily incidents.

My favorite of Barton's parables is called "Crumbs and Bubbles." It's the best illustration I've ever found for appreciating the slow but sure process of real change.

As the parable begins, Safed is spending a quiet day with his granddaughter when it begins to snow. The little girl looks out the window and notices the fluffy, falling flakes. She asks her grandfather to take her outside to play in the snow, and he cannot refuse.

Once outside, the little girl begins to giggle with delight as the snow comes down. She says, "Look, Grandpa, the snow is making crumbs and bubbles."

When he asks her what she means by crumbs and bubbles, she explains, "The bubbles are falling against your face, Grandpa, and turn to water. But the crumbs land on your overcoat. They don't melt and you can brush them off. Watch."

Safed marvels at the way the small child put the words together to describe her new experiences. They spend the day enjoying the crumbs and bubbles until the cold sends them inside to thaw by a crackling fire.

The next morning he awakens and notices how quiet everything has become. There is no movement outside, no noise from trains, cars, or footsteps. He looks out the window and observes that the snow has fallen in great drifts and brought the entire town to a halt.

Then he remembers the cute words of his granddaughter and how she describes the crumbs and bubbles of snow, which now have piled up in such great drifts that they can stop a powerful train.

Then Safed unpacks the parable. He says, "I considered that it is even so with many things in life that are small in themselves, but when multiplied they become habits that people cannot break, or grievances that rend friendships asunder, even as great drifts are made of bubbles and crumbs of snow."³

And, I would add, so it is with the crumbs and bubbles of Christian for-

mation. These are the disciplines, the little things we can do that make us more aware of God's loving presence. In and of themselves, these things can seem so small and insignificant. A few minutes here to meditate on a passage of Scripture, a few there to stop and just be with God, listening for his voice, a moment before surrendering to sleep to inventory the day and examine our conscience, being honest about a lack of desire, asking for help in trusting his love. So small, yes, but they can pile up in drifts great enough to stop a runaway ego.

Crumbs and bubbles are the things we can do each day by direct effort that make it possible to do what we could never accomplish by direct effort: the transformation of our will, thought, emotion, behavior, and social interaction through inward surrender to God's internal presence.

Falling in love with God and allowing our relationship with him to deepen through taking the time for the tiny disciplines of affection can lead us down the path to ultimate union. Real change happens through the development of a romantic relationship with God. And it happens one crumb and one bubble at a time.



Bible Study: The Wedding Feast at Cana

Text: John 2:1-10

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

“Dear woman, why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. “My time has not yet come.”

His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

Observations

Jesus had a lot of time to think about this moment. He waited for a very long time after the Fall before stepping into human history, and then he waited thirty more years before beginning his public ministry. Eons plus thirty years to consider this moment, the event of his first miracle. I don't think it's an accident that he chooses a wedding feast for the backdrop—after all, the church would come to be referred to as his bride, and he, the Groom. But something else seems to be going on here, something symbolic, mystical. It's no surprise that John, the mystic, is the only gospel writer to cover this breaking story. Jesus asks for six earthen vessels containing twenty to thirty gallons of water each. A gallon of water weighs in at about eight pounds. The filled earthen vessels at Cana weighed between 160 and 240 pounds. That describes a lot of people I know.

With wedding images in the background, Jesus takes center stage and kicks off his public ministry by radically changing the contents of earthen vessels. Spirit is added, and plain water becomes extraordinary wine. Transformation. Jesus' first miracle foreshadows all that will follow. It's about radical changes to the contents of earthen vessels. Water to wine. Saul to Paul. You to Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you respond to the idea that Jesus intentionally chose a wedding for the setting of his first miracle?
2. In what way might the miracle of Cana also foreshadow the sacrament of Holy Communion? *Hint:* How does communion symbolize the mystery of "Christ in me" and changing the contents of earthen vessels?
3. Does the content of your earthen vessel seem more like water or wine right now? Why? What can you do to help bring about a change—or to continue to be brimming with the good stuff?

Meditation: A Historic Model for Change

Explanation

I believe that all the great revival movements of church history began and spread as a result of an experience of real change within the souls of believers. From Calvin to Wesley and from Keswick to Azusa Street, we find magnificent accounts of transformed lives, souls aflame with the presence and love of God.

But then it happens, it always happens, the statistical concept known as regression to the mean. The gravitational pull of the world against all who would soar above.

With the passing years, flames of love often begin to flicker and turn into

smoldering ashes. The joy of salvation may be reduced to the sterile, contractual security of having a fire insurance policy with God. The drag of complacency often slows sanctification into merely making efforts to avoid the behaviors in column B—instead of being empty of self and bubbling with the new wine of Christ’s love. For many, Spirit baptism comes to mean speaking in tongues instead of daily producing the lush fruit of the Spirit, the very character of Christ.

In all of church history only a small number of saints and apostles have been able to find a way to blast beyond the powerful pull of regression to the world’s mean. Their secret, I believe, is no secret at all. Saints are just like you and I—except they have determined to live their lives so close to God that it makes the devil too nervous to follow. Since they are walking that close to the Author of Life, they talk with him. Saints dialogue with God—keeping a conversation going throughout the day—until the relationship deepens into communion and communion leads to union.

One last thing before presenting our initial meditation exercise. Instead of using words like *saved* or *sanctified* (good words—but words that can become too familiar and thus diminished), the early church described the process of spiritual transformation as a lifelong pilgrimage of *purgation* (releasing those things that pull us away from God), *illumination* (receiving what draws us close to him), and *union* (Christ fully integrated into the fabric of our soul until our wills, minds, emotions, behaviors, and social interactions are one.) This beautiful language resists static complacency.

In this section of each chapter I will offer a brief presentation of a meditation designed to amplify the section and chapter theme of conversation, communion, or union while focusing on one of the three classic movements of transformation: purgation (releasing), illumination (receiving), or union (integration). This is done to imitate the wisdom of the early church and as a way to weave practical suggestions into each chapter.

Meditation

Richard J. Foster has made popular a simple meditation that highlights the meaning and experience of purgation and illumination. It goes like this:

Sit in a comfortable position and allow your mind to become quiet and your breathing to deepen. After a few minutes of becoming centered, place your hands in your lap with your palms facing down—signifying a willingness to let go or release things that impede your journey of transformation. As you continue to breath slowly and deeply, say to the rhythm of your breathing, “Lord, I release my attachments to everything in life that distracts me from spending time with you.” Perhaps a few specific things will come to mind, and you will name them before God as you continue to hold your palms face down.

Then after a time of releasing, perhaps three to ten minutes, turn your palms face up and pray as you breathe, “Lord, I receive from you a deeper awareness of your presence in my life.” Stay with this for three to ten minutes, but attempt to carry the attitude of awareness throughout the day.

Spiritual Exercise: The Five Ps of Prayer

Explanation

This exercise appears first because of its foundational nature. Other exercises in this book will be based on your having a foundational understanding of these Five Ps of Prayer. Slowly read through the Five Ps of Prayer and then incorporate each into the prayer exercise that follows.

Place

Find a *place* for prayer that is quiet, comfortable, and free from distractions. Any old monastery will do—as will your living room, den, or office at certain times of the day. There must be no chance, however, of being disturbed.

Position

Place yourself in a comfortable physical *position*. It will be better if neither your arms nor legs are crossed. Sitting in a straight-back posture is best. Stretched out on the floor or bed will only work for true insomniacs. Recliners are death to prayer.

Pace

Slow the *pace* of your breathing to four to seven deep breaths per minute.

Take deep, slow, and diaphragmatic breaths. Do this by keeping your chest relatively still as your lungs fill with air and your belly expands. It may help to place your hand over your stomach and feel it push out as you inhale.

After learning how it feels to breathe deeply by expanding your diaphragm, count as you slowly breathe in and out. That is, slowly count from one to four as you breathe in. Hold the breath for a count of one, two, or three (whatever feels most comfortable). Then breathe out as you slowly count from one to four and pause for a moment before you repeat the process.

Perceptions

As you set the stage for listening or contemplative prayer, don't seek for anything sensational. Instead, limit yourself to observing. Become aware of sensations—the touch of your clothes on your shoulders, your clothes on your back, or your back touching the chair you are sitting on. Be aware of sensations coming to you from your hands, feet, and legs. Feel the temperature of the room and any warm or cool movements of air. Focus your perceptions on your body and senses. For contemplative or listening prayer, it is essential to make contact with the present and stay there.

Resist the temptation to seek novelty of experience. Instead, seek depth of awareness. When thoughts come to your mind, resist the temptation to follow them around. Also resist the temptation to become frustrated by your thoughts. Instead, observe them as someone stationed by an open window might watch

passersby on the street. Or as you might passively observe ascending balloons. But keep a stationary, observing posture.

Return often to the sensation of your slow, deep breathing. Focus on the tips of your nostrils and feel the coolness as you breathe in, the warmth as you breathe out.

Purpose

Remember that the aim of prayer is to enter into conversation with God. It is not restricted to certain hours of the day. A Christian can feel herself in the presence of God. The goal of prayer is precisely to be with God always.

Exercise

Find a time and place to begin experiencing the Five Ps of Prayer for at least fifteen to twenty minutes. After taking some time to quiet yourself and rest in the presence of God, initiate a conversation with him about the theme of this chapter: “First I’ve got to admit it’s broken.”