

Madame Guyon **(1648-1717)**

Madame Jeanne Guyon was born at Montargis, France. When she was only fifteen, she married an invalid who was thirty-eight years old. Unhappy in her marriage, she sought happiness in her devotional life. She lived in a convent under royal order for a year and then was imprisoned in Vincennes and the Bastille because of her religious beliefs. Almost twenty-five years of her life were spent in confinement. Many of her books were written during that period.

Writing that compels the reader to move into a living experience of Jesus Christ is Madame Guyon's great contribution to devotional literature. The following excerpts come from her book *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (sometimes titled *A Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer*). This book has had a wide influence: Watchman Nee saw that it was translated into Chinese and made available to every new convert in the Little Flock; François Fénelon, John Wesley, and Hudson Taylor all highly recommended it to the believers of their day.

EXPERIENCING THE DEPTHS OF JESUS CHRIST

Two Ways to Meet Jesus

I would like to address you as though you were a beginner in Christ, one seeking to know him. In so doing, let me suggest two ways for you to come to the Lord. I will call the first way "praying the Scripture"; the second way I will call "beholding the Lord" or "waiting in his presence."

Praying the Scripture

"Praying the Scripture" is a unique way of dealing with the Scripture; it involves both reading and prayer. Turn to the Scripture; choose some passage that is simple and fairly practical. Next, come to the Lord. Come quietly and humbly. There, before him, read a small portion of the passage of Scripture you have opened to.

Be careful as you read. Take in fully, gently, and carefully what you are reading. Taste it and digest it as you read. In the past it may have been your habit, while reading, to move very quickly from one verse of Scripture to another until you have read the whole passage. Perhaps you were seeking to find the main point of the passage.

Reading Slowly

But in coming to the Lord by means of "praying the Scripture," you do not read quickly; you read very slowly. You do not move from one passage to another, not until you have *sensed* the very heart of what you have read. You may then want to take that portion of Scripture that has touched you and turn it into prayer.

After you have sensed something of the passage, and after you know that the essence of that portion has been extracted and all the deeper sense of it is gone, then, very slowly, gently, and in a calm manner begin to read the next portion of that passage. You will be surprised to find that when your time with the Lord has ended, you will have read very little, probably no more than half a page.

Penetrating into the Depths

"Praying the Scripture" is not judged by *how much* you read but the *way* you read. If you read quickly, it will benefit you little. You will be like a bee that merely skims the surface of a flower. Instead, in this new way of reading with prayer, you become as the bee who penetrates into the *depths* of the flower. You plunge deeply within to remove its deepest nectar.

Of course, there is a kind of reading the Scripture for scholarship and for study – but not here. That studious kind of reading will not help you when it comes to matters that are *divine!* To receive any deep, inward profit from the Scripture you must read as I have described. Plunge into the very depths of the words you read until revelation, like a sweet aroma, breaks out upon you. I am quite sure that if you will follow this course, little by little you will come to experience a very rich prayer that flows from your inward being.

Beholding the Lord

Let us move now to the second kind of prayer which I mentioned earlier. The second kind of prayer which I described as "beholding the Lord" or "waiting on the Lord," *also* makes use of Scripture, but it is actually not a time of reading.

Remember, I am addressing you as if you were a new convert. Here is your second way to encounter Christ. And this second way, although you will be using the Scripture, has a purpose altogether different from "praying the Scripture." For that reason you should set aside a separate time when you can come just to wait upon Christ.

In "praying the Scripture" you are seeking to find the Lord in what you are reading, in the very words themselves. In this path, therefore, the content of the Scripture is the focal point of your attention. Your purpose is to take everything from the passage that unveils the Lord to you.

Quieting the Mind

In "beholding the Lord" you come to the Lord in a totally different way. Perhaps at this point I need to share with you the greatest difficulty you will have in waiting upon the Lord. It has to do with your mind. The mind has a very strong tendency to stray away from the Lord. Therefore, as you come before the Lord to sit in his presence, beholding him, make use of the Scripture to *quiet* your mind.

The way to do this is really quite simple. First, read a passage of Scripture. Once you sense the Lord's presence, the content of what you have read is no longer important. The Scripture has served its purpose; it has quieted your mind; it has brought you to him.

Turning Inward by Faith

So that you can see him more clearly, let me describe the way in which you come to the Lord by the simple act of beholding him and waiting upon him. You begin by setting aside a time to be with the Lord. When you do come to him, come quietly. Turn your heart to the

presence of God. How is this done? This, too, is quite simple. You turn to him by *faith*. By faith you believe you have come into the presence of God.

Next, while you are before the Lord, begin to read some portion of Scripture. As you read, *pause*. The pause should be quite gentle. You have paused so that you may set your mind on the Spirit. You have set your mind *inwardly* – on Christ.

You should always remember that you are not doing this to gain some understanding of what you have read; rather, you are reading in order to turn your mind from outward things to the deep parts of your being. You are not there to learn or to read, but you are there to experience the presence of your Lord!

While you are before the Lord, hold your heart in his presence. How? This you also do by faith. Yes, by faith you can hold your heart in the Lord's presence. Now, waiting before him, turn all your attention toward your spirit. Do not allow your mind to wander. If your mind begins to wander, just turn your attention back again to the inward parts of your being. You will be free from wandering – free from any outward distractions – and you will be brought near to God. The Lord is found *only* within your spirit, in the recesses of your being, in the Holy of Holies; this is where he dwells.

The Lord Will Meet You

The Lord once promised to come and make his home within you (John 14:23). He promised there to meet those who worship him and do his will. The Lord *will* meet you in your spirit. It was St. Augustine who once said that he had lost much time in the beginning of his Christian experience by trying to find the Lord outwardly rather than by turning inwardly.

Once your heart has been turned inwardly to the Lord, you will have an impression of his presence. You will be able to notice his presence, more acutely because your outer senses have now become very calm and quiet. Your attention is no longer on outward things or on the surface thoughts of your mind; instead, sweetly and silently, your mind becomes occupied with what you have read and by that touch of his presence.

Oh, it is not that you will think about what you have read, but you will *feed* upon what you have read. Out of a love for the Lord you exert your will to hold your mind quiet before him. When you have come to this state, you must allow your mind to rest.

In this very peaceful state, *swallow* what you have tasted. At first this may seem difficult, but perhaps I can show you a simple way. Have you not, at times, enjoyed the flavor of a very tasty food? But unless you were willing to swallow the food, you received no nourishment. It is the same with your soul. In this quiet, peaceful, and simple state simply take in what is there as nourishment.

Distractions

What about distractions? Let us say your mind begins to wander. Once you have been deeply touched by the Lord's Spirit and are distracted, be diligent to bring your wandering mind back to the Lord. This is the easiest way in the world to overcome external distractions.

When your mind has wandered, don't try to deal with it by changing what you are thinking. You see, if you pay attention to what you are thinking, you will only irritate your mind and stir it up more. Instead, *withdraw* from your mind! Keep turning within to the Lord's presence. By doing this you will win the war with your wandering mind and yet never directly engage in the battle!

Disciplining the Mind

As you begin this new venture you will, of course, discover that it is difficult to bring your mind under control. Why is this? Because through many years of habit your mind has acquired the ability to wander all over the world, just as it pleases, so what I speak of here is something that is to serve as a discipline to your mind.

Be assured that as your soul becomes more accustomed to withdrawing to inward things, this process will become easier. There are two reasons that you will find it easier each time to bring your mind under the subjection of the Lord. One is that the mind, after much practice, will form a new habit of turning deep within. The second is that you have a gracious Lord!

The Lord's Chief Desire

The Lord's chief desire is to reveal himself to you and, in order for him to do that, he gives you abundant grace. The Lord gives you the experience of enjoying his presence. He touches you, and his touch is so delightful that, more than ever, you are drawn inwardly to him.

BIBLE SELECTION

Genesis 28:10-19 (NRSV)

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

BREATH PRAYER

(Inhale) "Surely the LORD ..."

(Exhale) "... is in this place."

JOURNAL QUESTIONS

1. Madame Guyon places great emphasis on our level of desire for God. What does the term "desire" personally mean to you? Looking back over the past year, what actions and/or experiences have contributed to an increase in your desire for God?
2. In this week's Bible passage (Gen. 28:10-19), Haran became a sacred place for Jacob due to his profound encounter with God. What are some of the sacred places in your life where you've experienced a meaningful encounter with God?
3. Optional Stretch Exercises:
 - This week set aside fifteen minutes to "pray the Scripture." Using Madame Guyon's approach, remember to:
 - Choose a simple passage.
 - Read it slowly.
 - Try to sense the heart of each verse before moving on.
 - When something strikes you as particularly meaningful, turn it into prayer.
 - Set aside fifteen minutes each day this week to "behold the Lord" Keep in mind the simple steps the author suggests:
 - Use a passage of Scripture to help you focus on God's presence.
 - Read the words until you are able to focus on God's presence.
 - Keep your heart and mind fixed on the presence of God.
 - When your mind wanders, come back to the Bible passage to help you refocus.

REFLECTIONS FROM RICHARD J. FOSTER

The strength of Jeanne Guyon's writing is its simplicity. We must not despise this quality in her, thinking that because it is simple it must therefore be simplistic. Far from it! Her words are profound indeed and will lead us into rich encounters with the living Christ if, with humility of heart, we are willing to learn. In The Imitation of Christ Thomas à Kempis urges us to read "devout and simple books" as willingly as we do those that are "lofty and profound" for we should always be attracted to "the love of pure truth."

But what a book! It wins us over by its unpretentiousness. It exposes the shallowness of our own spirituality. And it invites us deeper in. It welcomes us into the Holy of Holies. Most of all, it makes the life of prayer so delightful, so refreshing, that we are drawn into "experiencing the depths of Jesus Christ" for ourselves.

Excerpts taken from *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, Editors. HarperCollins, 1993.)