



# Turned by Divine Love

Starting again with God and with others

JOHN STROYAN

## **The Bible Reading Fellowship**

15 The Chambers, Vineyard  
Abingdon OX14 3FE  
[brf.org.uk](http://brf.org.uk)

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## To Mary

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Turn me and I shall be turned.

JEREMIAH 31:18 (GW)

## Acknowledgements

The reflections that follow are, inevitably, the fruit of life and ministry in a wide variety of contexts over many years. A common strand running through them is the ecumenical one and the conviction, expressed by Pope John Paul II, that ‘the church needs to learn to breathe again with its two lungs – its eastern one and its western one’. My own inner life and ministry has been particularly enriched by considerable contact with the Orthodox Church in this country and overseas, not least on Mount Athos. In this country, a rich gift to me over the past 20 years has been a growing friendship with the Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex, a place where God is truly worshipped and encountered, not least through the praying of the Jesus Prayer. I am most grateful to the Abbot, Archimandrite Kyrill, for his warm and gracious hospitality over so many years and to Father Zacharias for his friendship and inspiration. I am, in turn, most grateful to Paul Hunt, a true friend in Christ, who introduced me to the monastery and with whom I have been meeting as ‘Companions on the Way’ for many years. It was Paul who invited me to lead with him the retreat in the Sinai desert.

Another friend, whom I have been privileged to know, is Dr Solomon Raj, a pastor of the Protestant Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in India and an inspirational artist. Solomon’s batiks and woodcuts on Christian themes have touched and inspired many lives not only in India but across the world. I commissioned the batik on the front cover with the brief to depict the tenderness of God’s unconditional love to all who turn to him. I am most grateful to Solomon for permission to use his work in this publication.

A more recent source of inspiration has been the ecumenical Monastic Community of Bose, a place of joy, hospitality and spiritual and ecumenical renewal. The community of brothers and sisters at

Bose, many of them young, attract so many to faith and renewal. I am especially grateful to Sister Elisa for permission to use icons and images from their workshop, and to Sister Lara whose work they are.

Closer to home, I would like to thank Christopher, Bishop of Coventry, and the Diocese of Coventry for the sabbatical space (May–July 2017) in which I was able to do this writing. Even closer to home, I would like to thank Kerry Vanston-Rumney, my PA, who has gone the extra mile again and again, helping with sourcing quotations and copyright. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Mary, to whom I dedicate this work.



## Preface

**In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. But you refused.**

ISAIAH 30:15

These words were written probably in the late eighth century BC. At that time, we find the people of Judah under attack from Assyria. In the face of this attack and their obvious vulnerability, they are looking to Egypt for help. In place of seeking and trusting the wisdom of God, they are devising their own plans without reference to God. They are looking for the ‘protection of Pharaoh’. In a crisis, it is always tempting, and perhaps even our default mode, to do the same: to look for solutions without seeking first the wisdom of God. We might do so because ‘realism dictates...’ or ‘experience suggests...’ or because we think we know best. Any such rationale reveals that we do not have the faith truly to listen to and trust God. Then, when we have made our plans without reference to God, we ask God to bless them.

One of the wonderful things about the Christian faith is that it is all about starting again. It is not just about the first time we turned to Christ, however pivotal and decisive that was in our life’s journey. It is about starting again each day. Jesus calls us to take up our cross *each day* and to follow him. Anthony the Great began each day with the words ‘Today, I begin again.’ This book is about starting again. But this starting again is not just once in prayer at the beginning of each day. It is about the continual movement of turning and returning to God. Francis de Sales wrote to his spiritual directee, ‘Offer your whole soul, a thousand times a day to him.’ It is about turning to God, as the sunflower continually turns its face to the sun, to the light which is the source of its life and growth.

One of my great friends, when I was in my 20s and she in her 80s, was Dr Elsie Briggs. She was one of the pioneers of the Julian Groups, which meet for contemplative prayer. Her home is now a retreat centre in Westbury-on-Trym. She was a person of considerable intellect and a voracious reader. Those of us who knew her well would often hear her say to herself (but out loud!), ‘Elsie, read less, *ponder* more.’ There is something important about letting God speak to our *hearts*. Luke tells us that Mary ‘treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart’ (2:19).

In what follows, opportunities are given in each chapter to pause and, in that space, first to ponder and then to pray. These times of quiet reflection and giving space to God are intrinsic to the purposes of this book. I am mindful of St Paisios of Athos, who warned those who came to him of the danger of rushing through spiritual books as if this were some kind of accomplishment. He advised rather that it is better to ponder and apply one small sentence of God’s word than to read many books about it.



When we give ourselves to God in the measure that he desires, he will know how to bestow us on others, or if he chooses, keep us for himself.

St Basil of Caesarea

**John Stroyan**



*Moses in Front of the Burning Bush (Loca sancta icon)*

**Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.**

EXODUS 3:5



## Turning aside: to look and to see

**Be silent, all people, before the Lord.**

ZECHARIAH 2:13

**Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.**

ECCLESIASTES 5:2

**Silence is a mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments of this world.**

St Isaac the Syrian<sup>1</sup>

The first-century writer and bishop, Ignatius of Antioch wrote, 'It is better to be silent and to be than to make fluent professions and not to be.'<sup>2</sup> These ancient words remind us that there is so much noise, both literally and metaphorically, around us and within us, that we find it hard 'to be silent and to *be*'. We find it hard to 'be still and know' the presence of God (Psalm 46:10). So often we find ourselves caught up in other priorities. Evelyn Underhill, Anglican mystic and teacher, wrote in 1936 that we spend our lives 'conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have and to Do'. Such desires and activities, she concludes, keep us in 'perpetual unrest; forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except in so far as they are transcended by and included in the fundamental verb to *Be*'.<sup>3</sup>

But what does it mean to *be*? In an age that has rediscovered mindfulness, which actually has ancient Christian roots, it means to be *present*, to be present in the present moment to what *is*. This means,

to the Christian, being present to the one who is: that is, to God. In Orthodox iconography, in the icon of Christ, *Pantocrator*, around his face are the words ὁ ὢν, 'The one who is' (Revelation 1:8). The very name of God, spoken to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), 'I am who I am', means the 'one who is'. So to be present is to be present to the one who is always present to us but to whom we – in our preoccupations – are so rarely present ourselves. In his *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo put it simply. Addressing God about his early life before he came to faith, he writes, 'You were with me but I was not with you.'<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein, the German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) writes, 'God is near us, but we are far from him; God is within, we are without; God is at home but we are in a far country.'<sup>15</sup>

God is with us, but so often we are not alert or attentive to his presence.

Being, though, is not simply about being attentive to the presence of God. It is also, by the same token, about being attentive to what is going on around us and within us. It is about living in the present moment or, in the words of the poet R.S. Thomas, 'not hurrying on to a receding future nor hankering after an imagined past.'<sup>16</sup> As the scriptures remind us, it is about the immediacy of 'today' and 'now', as in, for example, the words of the psalmist, later echoed in the letter to the Hebrews, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' (Hebrews 4:7; see Psalm 95:7–8). The apostle Paul also recognises the urgency of an immediate response to the word and presence of God: 'It is *now* the moment for you to wake from sleep' (Romans 13:11); '*Now* is the acceptable time... *now* is the day of salvation' (2 Corinthians 6:2). How often do we prevaricate in our relationship with God? Our minds prefer to engage with the past or the future and resist the present moment. The scriptures, however, make it clear that the time to respond to God is always *now*, *this moment*.

So how alert are we at any given moment to what is going on around us or within us? How attentive are we actually to whatever or whomever is in front of us? What about right now, at this very

moment of reading these words? We've all had the experience of reading a page and realising that we haven't taken any of it in! Our minds have been elsewhere; there are so many diverting distractions both within us and around us. The distracting thoughts inside us have been described by the 19th-century Russian saint Theophan the Recluse as like flies buzzing around on a summer's evening.<sup>7</sup> But it is not only the thoughts and voices within us that clamour for and claim our attention; there are also plenty of external distractions. Some of these we *choose* to be distracted by. A wonderful example of a typically contemporary distraction is a Banksy mural in Bristol depicting a young couple. Though embracing each other, the entire attention of each of them is focused on the mobile phone each is holding behind their loved one's head! It epitomises the diffusion of attention that seems to have a grip on most of us.

By way of contrast, an example of concentrated attention can be seen in Stanley Spencer's depiction of a somewhat chubby, bearded but childlike Christ. He is on all fours gazing in rapt attention at some daisies on the ground. It is entitled *Christ in the Wilderness: Consider the lilies*.



*Christ in the Wilderness: Consider the lilies* (Stanley Spencer)

Have we lost that childlike ability to notice, admire and wonder at God's creation around us? We might ask, with the poet William Davies:

*What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?*<sup>8</sup>

Vincent van Gogh, whose art was full of extraordinary attentiveness to the glory of God in and through creation, as we see, for example, in his paintings of sunflowers and irises, writes to his brother Theo, 'We must admire more. Most people do not admire enough.'<sup>9</sup>

I must turn aside and look... and see.

EXODUS 3:3

Being is also about looking, attending and seeing. Moses turns aside and looks, and sees. He sees a bush aflame with the fire of the glory of God. God tells him to take off his sandals, for the ground on which he is standing is holy. Moses' eyes are opened to see the glory of God in and through God's creation in that particular place (believed to be the site of St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert) and at that particular time. God's words to Moses are particular to him too: 'I am the God of *your* father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3:6). The universal love of God revealed in and through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is at the same time for each one of us personally – as particular and unique children of God.

Moreover, the God who meets us personally at a particular time and in a particular place is also the God who is with us at all times and in all places. Holy ground is not simply the ground of God's past encounters with particular people in particular places, the kinds of places to which we go on pilgrimage; it is the ground on which we are actually standing, wherever we are. Poets, inspired by the story of the burning bush, have recognised this. 'Earth's crammed with heaven,' writes Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'but only he who sees takes off his shoes.'<sup>10</sup> In 'The Bright Field', R.S. Thomas captures

something of these moments of transcendence glimpsed in and through God's creation:

*It is the turning  
aside like Moses, to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth,  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*<sup>11</sup>

In similar vein, Gerard Manley Hopkins writes, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God, it will flame out, like shining from shook foil.'<sup>12</sup> As is said or sung in the great prayer of thanksgiving in the Eucharist, 'Heaven and earth are full of your glory.'

When I came back from co-leading a silent retreat in the Sinai desert, my boots were covered in sand. Perhaps childishly, I didn't clean them for some time, reflecting as I did that some of the grains of sand on my boots might have been the actual sand on which Moses stood, barefoot, and that gave me pause for thought. I thought it might be good to hold up one of these boots in a sermon as a prompt to help us to reflect on God's encounter with Moses at the burning bush. In the event, I did hold up one of those boots covered in Sinai sand, but I also held up one of my welly boots, caked in Warwickshire mud. The holy ground of God is the ground on which we stand, whoever we are and wherever we are. Just as we don't have to be or try to be *someone* other than we actually are for God to love us, so we don't have to be *somewhere* else for God to meet us. On this latter point, Esther de Waal, reflecting on the Benedictine vow of stability, writes, 'The reason for stability? God is not elsewhere.'<sup>13</sup>

The Orthodox daily prayer begins: 'Heavenly king, Comforter, Spirit of truth *who is everywhere and fills all things...* come.' Perhaps even more importantly, the holy ground of God is that which is deep and ineradicably within each of us, made as we are in the image of God. It is where God in his love and grace chooses to come and live. Jesus says, 'Make your home in me just as I do in you' (John 15:4, MSG).





## Pause to ponder

When we ponder, we need to slow down. We cannot ponder in a hurry. So we might just want to pause, breathe a bit more deeply and then, prayerfully, to seek what God might be wanting to say to us through the words we are reading or in the silence. It is better to stay with one phrase, sentence or scripture and to spend time on this than to move on quickly in the mistaken belief that the more we get through, the more we will accomplish. In pondering, less is more.

Be still, and know that I am God!

PSALM 46:10

It is impossible for muddy water to grow clear if it is constantly being stirred up.

Neilus of Ankara<sup>14</sup>

The place which Jesus takes in our soul he will never vacate, for in us is his home of homes and it is the greatest delight for him to dwell there.

Mother Julian of Norwich<sup>15</sup>

## Pause for prayer

Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

MATTHEW 28:20

Leave the past to the infinite mercy of God, the future to his good providence; give the present wholly to his love.

Jean-Pierre de Caussade<sup>16</sup>

Let us now be still in the presence of God and ask the Holy Spirit to help us to be aware of the presence of God within us and around us.

## Notes

### Chapter 1 Turning aside: to look and to see

- 1 Holy Transfiguration Monastery (tr.), *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), p. 467.
- 2 St Ignatius of Antioch, *The Epistle to The Ephesians*.
- 3 Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Morehouse Publishing, 2008), p. 20.
- 4 St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, book X, chapter XXVII.
- 5 Meister Eckhart, *Mysticism*, chapter 6.
- 6 R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1945–1990* (Phoenix, 2004), p. 302. Used by permission.
- 7 Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name* (accessed via [oodegr.com/english/psychotherap/dyn\\_onom1.htm](http://oodegr.com/english/psychotherap/dyn_onom1.htm))
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- 9 Ronald de Leeuw (ed.), *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (Penguin Books, 1997), p. 6.
- 10 Elizabeth Barrett Browning (ed. Kerry McSweeney), *Aurora Leigh* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 246.
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- 12 G.M. Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (Penguin, 1985), p. 27.
- 13 Esther de Waal, *Seeking God* (Fount, 1984), p. 65.
- 14 St Neilus of Ankara, *Exhortation to Monks*, paragraph 79, 1236B.
- 15 Mother Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, chapter 22.
- 16 Robert Llewelyn (ed.), *The Joy of the Saints* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988), p. 4.
- 17 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Dover Publications, 1994), p. 36.
- 18 T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–62* (Faber and Faber Ltd, 1974), p. 178. Used by permission.
- 19 W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (Faber and Faber Limited, 1994), p. 533. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.
- 20 Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (Penguin, 2007), p. 63.
- 21 Auden, *Collected Poems*, p. 249. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.
- 22 Basil Hume, *The Intentional Life* (Paraclete Press, 2003), p. 22.



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**John Stroyan is the Bishop of Warwick and President of the Association for Promoting Retreats.**



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