



**JOURNEY  
TO THE  
CENTRE  
OF THE  
SOUL**

**A handbook  
for explorers**

**Andrew D. Mayes**

## **The Bible Reading Fellowship**

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## Introduction

This book is a summons to a spiritual adventure, an odyssey of the soul. Its aim is to invigorate and inspire a search for something deeper in the spiritual life, and as a handbook it provides references to trusted guides that will support and nourish us as we progress on a journey of discovery. We will mine the rich seams of Christian spirituality, risk the depths, face the darkness and make astonishing, transformative discoveries. This is a book for the curious, for the inquisitive—for people who sense that there is much more to find in their spiritual quest.

In two earlier books, I have explored the spiritual life through the imagery of the visible landscape. In *Holy Land? Challenging questions from the biblical landscape* I led the explorer across the terrain of the Holy Land, which I had got to know well when working as course director at St George's College, Jerusalem, and through my ongoing ministry in regularly leading pilgrimages. There we explored the mountains, rivers, gardens, deserts and ocean and allowed the physicality of the land to throw at us vital questions and raise thorny issues in spirituality. In *Beyond the Edge: Spiritual transitions for adventurous souls* we followed Jesus into liminal spaces across the land, venturing to the coastlands, entering 'no-go areas', wading across the Jordan—all of which led us to unpack the theme of crossing boundaries in order to experience at once a radical letting-go and a startling rediscovery of the spiritual life. But now it is time to leave the surface terrain of the Holy Land and to venture underground.

This book explores the spiritual life through the extended metaphor of underground spirituality. It aims to be a handbook for explorers of the spiritual life—a guide to the interior spaces of the soul. It suggests an itinerary for explorers. Like complex cave systems, Christian spirituality can seem bewildering, disorientating—it is easy to get lost! So here I offer a guide and a pathway underground. The

subterranean world provides a range of rich imagery which helps us to discover essential resources, challenges and hidden treasures of the spiritual life.

Thus the starting point for our reflections here is the subterranean landscape itself, which becomes a catalyst for thinking about a range of issues which are both urgent and abiding. Each chapter explores a theme which is suggested by the underground features of the Holy Land. This approach is inspired by the prophetic and metaphorical approach to creation that we see in the scriptures. Topography suggests typology. The Psalms delight in the symbolism of water, rock, mountain and wind (Psalms 1, 18). Every prophet of the land exults in vivid images from the hills: the very terrain speaks the message. Isaiah cries out: 'Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low' (40:4). Hosea sees climate and field as bespeaking God: 'Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you' (Hosea 10:12). The prophets draw from the land powerful metaphors for salvation and judgement, and the contours of the terrain become a symbolic universe. Jesus himself reveals a deeply contemplative and sacramental approach to the land, the secrets of the kingdom revealing themselves through parables of rock, mountain, field and sea (Matthew 13; Mark 11:23). The very topography poses its own questions to us that will help us as we traverse the terrain of our own spiritual journey. Physicality points to spirituality: here we explore the inner reaches of the spiritual life through imagery given to us by geography, geomorphology and geology!

The subterranean world is out of view, but beneath our feet. It is close by, but often hard to access. It is a mysterious and intriguing world of secrets and hiddenness. But caves can be dangerous places too: hypothermia, slipping, flooding, falling rocks and physical exhaustion prove to be recurrent risks for explorers. Cavers need essential equipment and clothing to sustain them and to protect them from abrasion. They need to be both courageous and sensitive—

determined, possessing stamina, but also able to tread lightly and touch softly within a fragile environment. So too the reader of this book will need to be prepared for a tough but rewarding journey into the spiritual world. Spiritual explorers will need great reserves of openness and a zest, a craving, for discoveries which might turn out to delight or unsettle, to cheer or unnerve. And just as cavers generally work better in a team, where they can look out for one another, so this resource can be well used in a group, as a tool for navigating one's way through the season of Lent, or at any time in the year.

## A spirituality of descent

Onwards and upwards? Paul writes about 'the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 3:14, RSV), and in the history of Christian spirituality the metaphor of ascent prevails: the image of going up to God. The way to God seems to be up, up, up. Influenced by Platonic ideas in the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa uses the climbing of mountains as a model of Christian perfection in his *Life of Moses*. Writing at the monastery at Mount Sinai, the abbot John Climacus (579–649) suggests that the virtues form 30 rungs on the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. St Bonaventure writes of the 'mind's ascent to God' in his work *The Journey of the Mind into God*. Even John of the Cross in his masterpiece *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* uses this model of going up to God and leaving worldly things behind.<sup>1</sup> Ascent resonates with the modern desire for self-advancement and the seeking of promotion, 'going up the ladder', acquiring ever greater power and status. It encourages us to think in terms of hierarchy. It suggests that one must renounce the world and get away from it in order to find God.

However, our God is a descending God. Paul celebrates the *kenosis* of the Word, which leads to his welcome in the underworld (Philippians 2). The writer of Ephesians has a big question:

... each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore, it is said, 'When he ascended on high

he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.' (When it says, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ...)

EPHESIANS 4:7-9

Cosby writes of the descending God: 'If God is going down and we are going up, it is obvious that we are going in different directions... We will be evading God and missing the whole purpose of our existence.'<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich in his ground-breaking study *The Shaking of the Foundations* invites us to rediscover the metaphor of the depths of God:

Most of our life continues on the surface. We are enslaved by the routine of our daily lives... We are in constant motion and never stop to plunge into the depth. We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth... It is comfortable to live on the surface... It is painful to break away from it and to descend into an unknown ground.<sup>3</sup>

We are summoned to quit superficial living and risk a descent into the depths, where we may find God and in the process rediscover ourselves. As Richard Foster put it: 'Superficiality is the curse of our age... The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.'<sup>4</sup>

Christians living in places of uncertainty and danger have reminded us:

There is no ready-made path in spirituality, even when we follow masters and schools, ancient and modern... there is no ready-made path, but Jesus is the Way... there is no need to wait for maps to replace our spirituality or to stop us from creatively exploring new heights or greater depths... our spirituality is an adventure into the unknown, a struggle with all the risks, the greatest throw of our freedom; it is both the meaning of and the quest for our being.<sup>5</sup>

## The inviting caves of the Holy Land

In the Holy Land there are 45,000 caves! In Jerusalem the Hebrew University's Department of Geography has a dedicated Cave Research Unit. One of the things that strikes pilgrims to the Holy Land is the frequency with which they are required to go down into caves. Many of the holy places are, in fact, caves. The pilgrim descends underground into sacred grottos and caverns, and, in the subterranean mystery, finds God. These hidden chambers in the bowels of the earth turn out to be liminal places, thresholds of the divine, loci of theophany.

There are awesome caves associated with the Old Testament: the first to be mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 23) is the Cave of Machpelah, the burial place of Abraham and Sarah; today, this is below the great Herodian building at Hebron, which can be entered either at the Muslim side as a mosque or at the Jewish side as an adjoining synagogue. Sinai preserves the memory of Moses in the cave: to him God says: 'while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock' (Exodus 33:22). At Sinai we recall how Elijah fled and hid in a cave on Horeb when he was in a state of fear and stress. Here God questions him: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (1 Kings 19:9, 13). There is also the Cave of Elijah at the foot of Mount Carmel. The Cave of Zedekiah near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem is the largest man-made cave in the land, extending 230 metres under the Old City, and served as a quarry for Herod's rebuilding of the Second Temple. The mysterious caves of Qumran, in marl canyons overlooking the Dead Sea, held for almost 2000 years the precious documents of the Essenes, rediscovered in 1947. In the Islamic tradition, a mysterious cave below the great stony outcrop sheltered by the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is known as 'the well of souls', while we recall that it was after three years' solitude in the Cave of Hira near Mecca that Muhammad received the revelations of the Qur'an.

There are caves bound up with the New Testament story. The traditional birthplace of John the Baptist is found in the cave of Ein

Karem, while the domestic cave of Mary's House in Nazareth is now preserved under the largest church in the Middle East, the Basilica of the Annunciation. Around the Mount of Olives there are caves preserving special memories: the cave of Eleona where Constantine built a basilica to celebrate the teaching of Jesus, known as the Pater Noster site today; the grotto at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Gethsemane where Jesus often taught. Nearby, one descends over 80 steps from the Kidron Valley to the Tomb of Mary, a cavernous underground church which contains her empty sepulchre. The most important cave for Christians is the cave of Christ's burial and resurrection, parts of which are preserved in the *edicule* or 'little house' in the Church of the Resurrection, known as the Holy Sepulchre.<sup>6</sup>

Early Christian writers began to glimpse the symbolism of the caves. Eusebius of Caesarea notices a triad of 'mystical caves' which testify to three cardinal points of the then newly written Creed of Nicea: 'He was incarnate... He was crucified... He ascended...'

In the same region, Constantine recovered three sites for three mystical caves and enhanced them with opulent structures. On the cave of the first theophany [Bethlehem] he conferred appropriate marks of honour; at the one where the ultimate ascension occurred [Mount of Olives] he consecrated a memorial on the mountain ridge; between these, at the scene of the great struggle [Calvary and tomb of Christ], the sign of salvation and victory.<sup>7</sup>

In this book, such caves in the sacred landscape of the Holy Land become starting points or entry points for a spiritual quest.

## Joining a tradition of explorers

Throughout literature the underground world fascinates and captivates the imagination. It evokes a sense of mystery and excites both fear and hope. Caves and subterranean passages become archetypal images,

summoning us, at the same time, to make astonishing and life-changing discoveries, and also to confront our deepest anxieties and darkest corners. In the world of myth and legend, secret passageways lead to an underworld, where it becomes possible to make contact with unseen powers and forces. In popular legend, caves house gnomes, spirits, dragons and forgotten undiscovered treasure. In Greek mythology, heroes such as Hercules, Theseus, Orpheus and Odysseus make their courageous *katabasis*, a journey down to the underworld. Throughout mythology heroes and heroines, even gods and goddesses, have to descend to the nether regions in order to attain healing and salvation, or to obtain a vital piece of knowledge. The tale is told of Persephone, niece of Zeus, who delighted in living on the surface amid nature but very reluctantly entered the underworld. A great chasm opened up before her, a vast crack in the surface of the earth, and in great fear Persephone made her descent. She came to enjoy the world below, discovering untold treasures, and brought solace to lonely Hades, returning to the surface for half of the year to usher in a new springtime for the earth. Every autumn as the leaves fall, Persephone returns, willingly, to the underworld, a place that is no longer forbidding but, for part of the year, her home.

In the myth behind Wagner's *Ring*, the dwarf Andvari lived in a cave where he kept his treasure. This treasure, including the Ring itself, was stolen by the deceitful god Loki, but then cursed with destructive powers by Andvari. In Wagner's operas caves are places of struggle, conflict and paradox. Humanity's true colours are revealed underground; here, goodness and envy, kindness and violence compete.

In Tolkien's *The Two Towers* Gimli celebrates the beauty of the Glittering Caves, the cave system located behind the Deeping Wall of Helm's Deep: 'Immeasurable halls, filled with an everlasting music of water that tinkles into pools, as fair as Kheled-Zaram in the starlight.' The Glittering Caves was an immense, ore-filled cave system that extended deep down into the White Mountains for many miles and consisted of many different paths, tunnels and chambers.<sup>8</sup> A sense of

trepidation, exhilaration and anticipation builds as Richard Church's 1950 novel *The Cave* takes a group of young people deeper into the recesses of the earth. More recently the blockbusting movies celebrating Harry Potter's journeys often feature mysterious caves and underground adventures.

Jules Verne's 1864 classic odyssey *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* tells the epic account of the exploration of the underworld, a quest to discover the sources of life. The four key characters resonate with our experience as spiritual searchers, and we can identify with them in different ways. Professor Otto Lidenbrock, adventurous, determined, single-minded and impatient to make progress, is complemented by his nephew Axel, who is cautious, wary and hesitant. Grauben, Otto's goddaughter, is a gentle, beautiful soul, inquisitive and curious. Hans becomes their resourceful and imperturbable guide. In their quest, they face many dangers and risks, including monsters, storms and rock falls. In a journey they cannot predict, they experience both fearful encounters and astonishing discoveries.

## Using this book

The book is designed to be used by both individuals and groups. Questions at the end of each chapter are provided to stimulate personal reflection and group discussion. Three readerships are in mind. First, it is for Christians who are longing for movement and progress in their spiritual lives. Second, it is for those who support others on their spiritual journey: those who serve as spiritual directors, soul friends or companions. Third, it is for seekers, for those wanting to discover for themselves the astonishing riches of the Christian tradition. The book will open the user to a wide variety of spiritual resources that will inspire the spiritual journey. It can be used either alone or in house groups. It is recommended that both individuals and course participants keep a journal or notebook, in which to note and reflect on the transitions taking place in themselves as they undertake this life-changing journey.



# 1

## Reading the geology of the soul: your spiritual history

*The journey begins! How do you feel about becoming an explorer of the inner spaces? A mixture of anticipation blending with hope, exhilaration fighting apprehension? In this chapter we begin to read the geology of the soul: we discover and celebrate something of our unique make-up and identify the influences which have formed us thus far. It is time to see what lies beneath the surface, beneath our feet...*

The landscape of the Holy Land summons us to this adventure of discovery. It is marked by vivid contrasts. The very shape of the land has been formed by grating movements along fault lines, seismic shifts and clashes between tectonic plates in the Great Rift Valley of the Jordan: here, different sorts of masses meet and interact, in more than one sense. Here, where the desert and the sea face each other, where the bleak Dead Sea in the lowest place on earth is linked to the teeming and life-giving Sea of Galilee, where wilderness and fertility lie side by side, is a land of paradoxes and deeply challenging questions.

To the north, the Galilee region has been defined by earthquakes and volcanic activity, and black basalt rocks, spewed out from the depths, are to be found everywhere.<sup>1</sup> A mountain range, running north to south through the centre of the region, exposes limestones and sandstones of the Cretaceous period. The Judean hills form the spine of the country, and Jerusalem sits on the top of this ridge. It was created by the massive land movements generated by the Rift Valley fault where the African tectonic plate confronts the Arabian.

Here the Jordan River flows down into the Dead Sea, the world's lowest water mass, lying in a *graben* (ditch) caused by the breaking open of the earth's crust over millennia.

To the south, in the Negev desert, is found the Ramon crater. This is not actually an impact crater from a meteor nor a recess formed by volcanic eruption, but rather is the world's largest crater, or *makhtesh*, created by the unrelenting processes of differential erosion. The hard outer layer of rock, undermined by the erosion of softer rocks below, collapsed under its own weight. As the crater deepened, more layers of ancient rock were exposed, with rocks at the bottom of the crater being up to 200 million years old. Today, the crater is 500 metres deep and reveals a diversity of rock strata, including stunning red and yellow colours and forms.

## Spiritual formation

In our spiritual journey, we look to creation for descriptors of the inner, spiritual landscape—what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the *inscape*, the unique characteristics of the soul. Each of us has personal histories, hidden histories, the story of our soul. Our lives might be read like strata in rock.

The model of Christian formation has in recent years become a key way by which we can look at the influences that shape our spiritual lives. Jeremiah's image of the Potter working on the clay (18:1–6) reminds us that God not only makes us of the dust of the earth, he wants to shape and refashion us. God longs to do wonderful things with the raw material of a human life yielded to his hands. Spiritual formation is a process by which a person gets reshaped. The metaphor of formation is drawn from the natural world, speaking of a creative process at work in the landscape, both physical and spiritual. The language of formation implies that at the heart of spirituality is the raw material of a person's life, on which God acts in a creative way. Most of all, the language of formation communicates

the need for us to undergo a series of changes in our inner life, an evolution. It implies a process of change. Robert Mulholland puts it succinctly: ‘Spiritual formation is the experience of being shaped by God towards wholeness.’<sup>2</sup> Let’s unpack four dimensions.

## 1 Spiritual formation recognises ongoing creation

Spiritual formation attests to God’s ever-creative process of shaping our lives. We become caught up in God’s awesome creativity, first celebrated in the hymn to creation:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters... And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so. God called the dry land Earth... And God saw that it was good.

GENESIS 1:1-2, 9-10

Indeed, the language of formation evokes the second account of creation: ‘the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being’ (Genesis 2:7). It recalls the language of the Psalms. Psalm 139:14–15 wonders at God’s secret moulding of the person in the womb:

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Psalm 119:73 links formation and learning: ‘Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your

commandments.’ Psalm 33:15 talks about God forming the inner person: ‘he who fashions the hearts of them all’. God has a plan and design for each of us. He wants to do something beautiful in each of us, and enable us to reach our full potential in Christ. In prayer we detect the movements of the Creator Spirit. We dare to ask the question, ‘What is God doing in my life?’ We seek to discern and celebrate how we are growing, evolving, emerging into, as Paul put it, ‘God’s work of art’ (Ephesians 2:10, JB). God is ever-creative:

Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

ISAIAH 43:18-19

We seek to discern and celebrate God’s creativity in our life, so that we can tentatively name what God is doing in us.

## 2 Spiritual formation discovers vocation

In Isaiah’s Servant Songs the language of formation is often used in partnership with that of vocation: ‘But now thus says the Lord... he who formed you... I have called you by name, you are mine’; ‘the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise’ (Isaiah 43:1, 21). A similar link is found in God’s words to Jeremiah: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’ (Jeremiah 1:5).

Christian vocation, of course, springs from baptism. As Christ received at the Jordan the affirmation ‘You are my beloved Son’, so in baptism God establishes our true identity as his beloved sons and daughters. Spiritual formation is alert to the uniqueness of each person and attentive to questions of personal identity: Who am I? What am I becoming? What is God calling me to be? Spiritual formation encourages us to see vocation in dynamic, not static terms,

as something evolving, deepening, growing, not as a given ‘once for all’. We recognise signs of a vocation unfolding in the journey from baptism to heaven. We recognise our hidden gifts. We move towards total surrender to God and to the discovery within ourselves of gifts or talents that perhaps lie latent or unfulfilled. We get in touch with our destiny.

### 3 Spiritual formation encourages integration

We live in a fragmenting world. Even within ourselves, we find ourselves pulled apart, caught up in a multiplicity of tasks, with so little time... caught between the commitment to help build Christian community and the call to solitude; pulled between the ‘desert’ and the ‘city’; falling between ideals of holiness and the reality of our fragility.

We often experience a dichotomy in our lives between solitude and engagement, between action and contemplation. We too often divide things up or compartmentalise things, setting things in a needless opposition: prayer versus politics; sacred versus secular; Church versus world; time versus eternity; the body versus the soul. We find it very difficult to get in balance the ‘doing’ and the ‘being’. Stresses and strains can be formative, for good or ill.

The idea of spiritual formation emphasises that in prayer God wants to heal our dividedness, restore our unity, renew our wholeness in Christ. We need to be on the lookout both for signs of fragmentation, inner conflict and tension, and for signs of integration, evidences of things coming together, like the interweaving of strands in a Celtic design.

We need to be attentive to the overlap and interpenetration of different aspects of Christian formation. Sometimes three dimensions are identified: *human formation*—our heart, our personal relationships, our work, our emotions, our sexuality; *intellectual formation*—our mind, the issues we grapple with; *pastoral*

*formation*—our ministry as Christians. Such elements continually overlap and one will affect the other. Spiritual formation invites us to be attentive to the impact of our prayer on our lifestyle and our lifestyle’s impact on prayer. It encourages us to explore the links between the way we pray and the way we live—to make connections between our experience in prayer and what happens to us in the world.

So, formation is based on the central Christian truth of the incarnation—God taking on our human flesh and blood on earth. The incarnation abolishes for ever and unites the great divides between body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, heaven and earth. Spiritual formation focuses on what might, in prayer, contribute to the healing of our dividedness and be awake to potential barriers to our wholeness.

#### 4 Spiritual formation celebrates transformation

Paul emphasises our call to be transformed into Christ: ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind’ (Romans 12:2, ESV). In another place he puts it: ‘Beholding the glory of the Lord, we are being transformed—into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit’ (2 Corinthians 3:18, ESV). The Greek word Paul uses, *metamorphosis*, denotes a process of profound change.

What changes might we seek? What transformations or movements are we longing for? This might include growing awareness of God and self; ‘desolations and consolations’ in the Ignatian perspective; fresh realisations of how loved we are. The key transformation is growth into Christlikeness, closer resemblance to Christ, increasing identification with Christ, fulfilling our baptism. Spiritual formation is not a narcissistic, individualistic process of self-discovery. It is the process by which we become more fully conformed and united to Christ our risen Lord.

This work of transformation is essentially paschal, a walking in the way of the cross and in the way of resurrection. It requires a dying and rising, a letting go and letting God. It may well be a costly and painful process, involving a tearing down before a building up... until we can say with Paul: 'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). We are caught up in the divine-human synergy: we become partners with God the Holy Spirit as, through prayer, he shapes us all into the people he wants us to be.

## Reading the geology of the soul

Reflecting on different rock types, and the pressures they have been subject to, gives us an opportunity to take stock of our own spiritual formation, to use the metaphor. As we examine these now, bear in mind these questions: What are my defining characteristics? What has contributed to my make-up, my composition—the way I am? What have been the formative experiences and influences in my life? When have I been reshaped? Am I aware of any resistances to God, like hard rock difficult to break down?

## Formed by fire

Igneous rock (derived from the Latin *ignis* meaning 'fire') forms through the cooling of molten magma or lava. This magma may be derived from partial melts of pre-existing rocks in either the earth's mantle or crust. Typically, the melting of rocks is caused by an increase in temperature, a decrease in pressure, or a change in composition. Rocks like granite result when magma cools and crystallises slowly within the earth's crust. Rocks like basalt come from magma reaching the surface as lava. Precious ores containing minerals and gold may be located here.

Fire denotes the mysterious and energising divine presence of a theophany: the burning bush that calls Moses to his liberating

vocation (Exodus 3:2) and the awesome appearance of God on top of Mount Sinai: 'Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly' (Exodus 19:18, ESV). The divine fire falls on Elijah's sacrifice on top of Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38), consuming the offering. But the fire of the Old Testament is not only an outer visible conflagration. Jeremiah speaks of an inner flame, a divine compulsion: 'If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name", there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot' (Jeremiah 20:9, ESV).

Shockingly, Jesus cries out in the Gospel: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!' (Luke 12:49). The writer to the Hebrews warns us: 'our God is a consuming fire' (12:29). Fire often symbolises the Holy Spirit; Luke describes his advent in these terms: 'Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them' (Acts 2:3). Paul exhorts the Romans (12:11, RSV) to 'be aglow with the Spirit'. To Timothy he writes: 'For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands' (2 Timothy 1:6).

Two 14th-century writers in particular delight in the imagery of fire. The English mystic Richard Rolle (1300–49) opens his treatise *The Fire of Love* with the arresting words:

I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was a real warmth too, not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire... But once I realized that it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted.<sup>3</sup>

Rolle extols, with unbridled enthusiasm, the affective dimensions of Christian spirituality: he also describes the experience of God in terms of music, sweetness and light.<sup>4</sup>

The Italian seer Catherine of Siena (1347–80) writes of the imagery of fire in a very powerful way:

You know the only thing that can bind a person is a bond; the only way to become one with the fire is to throw oneself into it that not a bit of oneself remains outside it... Once we are in its embrace, the fire of divine charity does to our soul what physical fire does; it warms us, enlightens us, changes us into itself. Oh gentle and fascinating fire! You warm and you can drive out all the cold of vice and sin and self-centeredness! This heat so warms and enkindles the dry wood of our will that it bursts into flame and swells in tender loving desires, loving what God loves and hating what God hates. And I tell you, once we see ourselves so boundlessly loved, and see how the slain lamb has given himself on the wood of the cross, the fire floods us with light, leaving no room for darkness. So enlightened by that venerable fire, our understanding expands and opens wide. For the light from the fire lets us see that everything (except sin and vice) comes from God... Once your understanding has received the light from the fire as I've described, the fire transforms you into itself and you become one with the fire... How truly then we can say that he is a fire who warms and enlightens and transforms us into himself!<sup>5</sup>

In the 16th century John of the Cross (1542–91) delights in the image of a human log becoming radiant in the divine flame: 'We can compare the soul in... this state of transformation of love to the log of wood that is ever immersed in fire, and the acts of this soul to the flame that blazes up from the fire of love. The more intense the fire of union, the more vehemently does this fire burst into flames.' It is a blending of fires human and divine, for John notes: 'Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed by love: the interior acts he produces shoot up flames, for they are acts of inflamed love, in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely.'

The divine flame cauterises the soul, and at once heals and pains—a divine wounding:

*O living flame of love  
That tenderly wounds my soul  
In its deepest centre!*<sup>6</sup>

In our own time, this archetypal language continues to resonate in our souls: Graham Kendrick prays: ‘Blaze, Spirit blaze, Set our hearts on fire!’ David Evans sings: ‘He burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned.’ So what does it mean?

The divine fire first denotes God’s purifying activity within us: ‘For he is like a refiner’s fire... he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness’ (Malachi 3:2–3). Isaiah experiences a burning coal on his lips and in the same moment recognises God’s call: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). John the Baptist speaks of God’s fire of judgement: ‘the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire’ (Matthew 3:12).

A second theme is the empowering, energising presence of God in us. The divine fire, kindled within us, illuminates our way and causes us to shine out with inextinguishable love—we are called to irradiate divine love, to be incandescent.

As the Orthodox Liturgy for Easter puts it:

Now are all things filled with light;  
Heaven and earth, and the nethermost regions of the earth!<sup>7</sup>

In a memorable episode from the Desert Fathers we learn the soul’s true potential:

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'<sup>8</sup>

Our potential and vocation is to be ignited by the Spirit, engulfed with his fire, radiant and ablaze with the Spirit himself, the divine flame. We need to allow ourselves to be scorched, singed, caressed by such a flame.

In what ways have you experienced the fire of the divine Spirit in your life? Has this been a comforting or disturbing experience?

## Formed by water

Sedimentary rocks are formed at the earth's surface by the accumulation and cementation of fragments of earlier rocks, minerals and organisms. This process causes sediments or organic particles (detritus) to settle and accumulate within layers or strata. Laid down by the ebb and flow of ancient seas, these rocks develop layer upon layer, the fossils preserving memories of the ancient past: stubborn or enduring remnants or relics of bygone ages. Sandstones, shales and limestone are the most common examples.

Before being deposited, sediments are formed by weathering, or earlier rocks by erosion in a source area, and then transported to the place of deposition by water, wind, ice, mass movement or glaciers. Such rocks are laid down in water and shaped by the action of water: deposition, erosion, formation.

As we shall explore in Chapter 4, water has become an evocative symbol of the spiritual life. The Bible begins and closes with rivers of water, bespeaking creation and new creation. Christian baptism

reminds us of the need to be flooded, engulfed, drenched and saturated by the waters of the Holy Spirit. Throughout our spiritual life we need the overflowing, inundating Spirit to irrigate the parched earth of our soul. Streams of grace need to percolate the soul.

St Teresa of Avila (1515–82) confesses: ‘I cannot find anything more apt for the explanation of certain spiritual things than this element of water; for, as I am ignorant and my wit gives me no help and I am so fond of this element, I have looked at it more attentively than at other things.’<sup>9</sup> The question is: how will we allow the water of God’s grace to touch our lives and reshape us? How can we develop our receptivity to such streams of grace?

Let us suppose that we are looking at two fountains, the basins of which can be filled with water... These two large basins can be filled with water in different ways: the water in the one comes from a long distance, by means of numerous conduits and through human skill; but the other has been constructed at the very source of the water and fills without making any noise. If the flow of water is abundant, as in the case we are speaking of, a great stream still runs from it after it has been filled; no skill is necessary here, and no conduits have to be made, for the water is flowing all the time. The difference between this and the carrying of the water by means of conduits is, I think, as follows. The latter corresponds to the spiritual sweetness which, as I say, is produced by meditation. It reaches us by way of our thoughts; we meditate upon created things and fatigue the understanding; and when at last, by means of our own efforts, it comes, the satisfaction which it brings to the soul fills the basin, but in doing so makes a noise, as I have said.

To the other fountain the water comes direct from its source, which is God, and, when it is his Majesty’s will and he is pleased to grant us some supernatural favour, its coming is accompanied by the greatest peace and quietness and sweetness within ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

In this passage from *The Interior Castle*, written in 1577, Teresa suggests there are two ways of receiving the water of God. Either we can stand at a distance from the fountain of God and receive the water of the Spirit, as it were, mediated through man-made and lengthy aqueducts and conduits, miles of pipelines of active, often noisy, talkative prayer. This in fact creates a distance from the fountain. Or we can stand very close to the fountain of God, quieten our spirit, and change our prayer from an active thinking and striving style to a more receptive passive, drinking-in style. In what Teresa calls ‘the Prayer of Quiet’, we can drink directly and immediately of the river of the Spirit bubbling up in front of us. How close, she asks, are you to the fountain?

Celebrate the ebb and flow of your spiritual life over the years. In each movement of the tide there is erosion and deposition—a cutting down and a building up, little by little. Fragments of experience coalesce in the spiritual journey. Things get glued together so that tiny fragments, perhaps weaknesses by themselves, become a strength.

## Transformed by upheaval and stress

Metamorphic rocks are formed by processes of transformation, gradual or sudden: where any rock type—sedimentary rock, igneous rock or another older metamorphic rock—has been subject to different temperature and pressure conditions than those in which the original rock was formed. This process is called metamorphism; meaning ‘to change in form’. The result is a profound change in the physical properties and chemistry of the stone.

Deep beneath the ground there are unseen but powerful forces at work. Sediments buried deep underground are subject to heaving processes and enormous weights pushed upon them. As this happens they change in character. In addition, fault lines and tectonic processes such as continental collisions cause horizontal

pressure, friction, distortion and reshaping. We can read the history of the earth by examining metamorphic rocks which have become exposed at the surface following erosion and uplift. Metamorphic rocks may have a painful history, but they produce the most stunning and beautiful rocks, including marble, quartzite and jade. Metamorphic rocks tell us that from our experience of compression, from our vulnerability, woundedness and brokenness, God can bring forth gems. The most precious creations come from those that are crushed.

What experiences does this evoke for you? Have you changed as a result of a rift or a collision of forces? What have been the most extreme forces at work in your life? What stresses have turned out to be creative and formative for you? Name the changes and shifts for yourself.

## The rock of salvation

Today's pilgrim to Jerusalem can touch and encounter the very rock of Calvary, part of a complex in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre that makes up 'the rock of our salvation'. The Gospel accounts of the first Easter specifically mention rock. There is the tomb itself which Joseph of Arithamea had had cut into the rock cliff (*petra*). There is the mighty rock or *lithos* that attempted to seal the tomb of Christ and was blasted away in the resurrection events, according to Matthew. There is evidence that the rock of Calvary itself is part of an ancient quarry.

This rock is scarred and shattered. The rock of Calvary itself may have been left standing amid the ancient quarry outside the city wall precisely because it was useless; a deep fracture running from its top into the earth indicates that it was unsuitable for use in building—it became a rejected rock. In Matthew's Gospel, Sinai-like earthquakes attend both the crucifixion and resurrection: 'The earth shook, and the rocks were split' (Matthew 27:51; see also 28:2). The rock of Calvary is indeed battered and bruised to this day: its deep scar

and fracture speak powerfully of the woundedness and vulnerability of Christ. To see this at the top of Calvary (by the Greek altar) or at the foot of Calvary (in the chapel of Adam) is to recall the pain, the bloodshed, of Christ himself. As Toplady sang: ‘Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.’ This prompted St Francis, when receiving the stigmata on Mount Alverna, to pray in the cleft of rocks, because they reminded him of the gaping wounds of Christ. As the hymn *Anima Christi* puts it: ‘Within thy wounds, hide me.’

Indeed, the first Christians, seeking to make sense of the event of Calvary, turned to the Hebrew scriptures and there they found texts which spoke of a rejected rock being used in God’s rebuilding purposes for humanity: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.’ This verse from the Psalms (118:22) is used by different communities in the New Testament (quoted in Mark, Matthew and Luke in the Holy Week story, by Peter in his sermon in Acts 4:11 and by the writer of 1 Peter 2:7). Jesus is also understood as ‘a stone one strikes against... a rock one stumbles over’ (Isaiah 8:14–15). But such a stone becomes the keystone in the new work, the new temple God is building, for a further text from Isaiah inspired the first Christians: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation’ (28:16). This is quoted in Romans (9:33) and 1 Peter (2:4–6). The wounded and fractured rock of Calvary, then, is at once a memorial to the crucifixion and a pointer to a new future. God uses rocks in his divine purposes!

## Questions for reflection

- 1 Which of the three major rock types do you most identify with? Why?
- 2 Recalling forces in your life that may be constructive or destructive, what formative events or influences do you wish to celebrate?
- 3 What do you feel about any possible woundedness, vulnerabilities, cracks or fractures? Where are your strengths?

- 4 How would you describe the present texture of your soul? Does it feel vulnerable, flaky, malleable, crumbly? Are there sharp edges? Any brittle or fragile parts? Are there parts that feel cracked or scarred, weathered, hardened or flaky? Does your soul feel in any way gravelly or gritty? Is it veined or streaked by recurring themes? What is the colour of your soul?
- 5 What parts of you might be named as resistances to God's formative purposes? Are you experiencing any friction in relation to God? What can you do to be more responsive to the purposes of God—whether that is akin to his work of erosion and a wearing down, or of reshaping and building up?

## Prayer exercise

### *Either*

Draw a T-shaped line on a fresh page. Let the horizontal top line represent the surface that you present to the world—your lifestyle, your persona. Let the vertical line stand for your hidden life, your personal history, the story of your soul. Mark it off roughly into thirds: at the base, to represent your life aged 0–20; the middle section 20–50; the upper section (if appropriate) your life from 50 to the present. Create horizontal bands to represent the three main strata. Give them a name: what kind of rock were you at that stage? To left and right of this put bold arrows to express the key influences that shaped your spiritual life in these periods: demands put upon you, responsibilities, key relationships and any creative influences. Maybe there are also painful events like bereavement or difficult change that you need to note, too.

As you review this investigation of the levels and layers and composition of the 'geology of your soul', give thanks for God's presence and providence in your life. Express sorrow or penitence where you have perhaps been resistant to God's activity. But above all, celebrate with praise the way God has shaped and reshaped your life: the signs that you bear today that you have experienced the fire,

the water, the transformation of the Holy Spirit! As you review the 'cross section' of your soul and discern the patterns and responses, use a prayer attributed to Macrina Wiederkehr: 'God, help me to believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it may be.' Respond with both your head and your heart!

Importantly, conclude with drawing a massive and substantial rock mass at the base of your vertical line, underpinning all the strata: the immovable, unshakable, indestructible bedrock. Write on it: 'The Lord is my rock' or 'the rock was Christ' (1 Corinthians 10:4), or 'Christ my rock' or 'Christ, the core of my being'.

End with words from the seventh-century hymn:

*Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and  
cornerstone,  
chosen of the Lord, and precious, binding all the Church in one;  
holy Zion's help for ever, and her confidence alone.*

Alternatively, conclude with the words of Psalm 18:2, 'The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.'

**Or**

Take a stone and hold it in the palm of your hand. Take a close look at it and admire its uniqueness. Are there rough or smooth parts to it? There is only one just like this, with its particular markings and structure. Make friends with it! Its past: wonder to yourself—where has this stone come from? What is its past, its history? What great cliff or mountain was it once part of? What is its geological story? Wonder about what happened to this rock. Was it pounded by waves in the sea? Was it polished by the movement of ice? Its future: what will become of this stone? Will it be taken by a youth and thrown through a window? Or just lie unwanted on the ground? Will this stone be used by a craftsman in a structure: in a wall, in an art installation? Will it be carefully reshaped and remoulded by an artist or mason?

Finally, let this stone speak to you of your own life, past and future. You have a unique history and your own special gifting. Give thanks to God for his providence and provision. Thank God for your own 'markings'—those things about yourself, your appearance and personality that make you different. As you hold the stone in your hands, realise that God holds you lovingly in his hands. And he has plans for you. He desires to shape and reshape your life—to mould you into his image, to accomplish his work of formation in you, to use you in the great building work of his kingdom. Peter put it: 'like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house' (1 Peter 2:5). Rejoice that your life is raw material in the hands of the creator and redeemer God. Give thanks that he has an unfolding design and purpose for your unique life. Entrust yourself afresh to God, remembering: 'We are God's work of art' (Ephesians 2:10, JB).

## Notes

### Introduction

- 1 For a critique of the ascent model, see M. Miles, *The Image and Practice of Holiness* (SCM, 1989).
- 2 N.G. Cosby, *By Grace Transformed: Christianity for a new millennium* (Crossroad, 1998), p. 31.
- 3 Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundation* (Charles Scribner & Sons, 1955), ch. 7.
- 4 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper, 1988), p. 1.
- 5 P. Casaldaliga and J.M. Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation* (Tunbridge Wells, 1994), p. xxvii. See also Gustaf Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (SCM, 1984).
- 6 See M. Biddle, *The Tomb of Christ* (Sutton, 1999).
- 7 *Life of Constantine*, quoted in P.W.L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places?* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 186.
- 8 The Glittering Caves is one of very few locations in Tolkien's work that we can associate with a real place. They were inspired by the caves of Cheddar Gorge, in the southern English county of Somerset.

### Chapter 1: Reading the geology of the soul

- 1 Capernaum is built of basalt rocks, for example.
- 2 M. Robert Mulholland Jr, *Invitation to a Journey: A road map for spiritual formation* (InterVarsity Press, 1993).
- 3 Quotations are from Clifton Wolters (tr.), *Richard Rolle: The fire of love* (Penguin, 1972), here Prologue. See also Rosamund Allen, (tr.), *Richard Rolle: English Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1988). Rolle has been called 'the father of English literature'.
- 4 He writes about both physical sensations and psycho-auditory sensations, akin to locutions, as the hearing of a symphony of spiritual sounds or heavenly choirs that resonated somehow in his mind (ch. 15). He talks about experiencing sweetness of feeling in his body, and celebrates the emotions of wonder and joy, and of becoming 'intoxicated with sweetness ever more rare' (Wolters, *Richard Rolle*, p. 144). See Denis Reveney, *Language, Self and Love: Hermeneutics in the writings of Richard Rolle and the commentaries*

- on the *Song of Songs* (University of Wales Press, 2001).
- 5 Letter 51, to Apostolic Nuncio to Tuscany.
  - 6 Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (trs), *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), pp. 641, 642.
  - 7 Paschal Canon in Holy Transfiguration Monastery, *The Pentecostarion* (Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1990), p. 29.
  - 8 Benedicta Ward (tr.), *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo & A.R. Mowbray, 1975), p. 103.
  - 9 E. Allison Peers (tr.), *St Teresa of Avila: Interior Castle* (Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 37. See also E. Allison Peers, *Mother of Carmel: A portrait of St Teresa of Jesus* (Laing Press, 2003), p. 54. See also J.M. Cohen, *The Life of Teresa of Avila by Herself* (Penguin, 1957), chapter XI.
  - 10 *Interior Castle*, IV:2:2, p. 37.

## Chapter 2: Entering the cave of the heart

- 1 Ward, *Desert Fathers*, p. 139.
- 2 Richard M. Rice (tr.), *Lives of the Monks of Palestine by Cyril of Scythopolis* (Cistercian, 1991), p. 1.
- 3 All the quotations from Basil are from 'Letter 2' in Georges Barrois (tr.), *The Fathers Speak* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).
- 4 Ward, *Sayings*, p. 131.
- 5 E. Allison Peers (tr.), *St Teresa of Avila: Interior Castle* (Sheed & Ward, 1974), pp. 1–2. For a recent translation, see Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (trs), *Teresa of Avila: The Interior Castle* (Paulist Press, 1979).
- 6 Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Continuum, 1991), pp. 113, 114.
- 7 Carolyn Humphreys, *From Ash to Fire: A contemporary journey through the Interior Castle of Teresa of Avila* (New City Press, 1992), p. 80. See also Tessa Bielecki, *Teresa of Avila: An introduction to her life and writings* (Burns & Oates, 1994).
- 8 Peers, *Teresa*, p. 33.
- 9 It is the Indian tradition that first speaks of 'the cave of the heart'. See Abhishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the cave of the heart* (ISPCK, 1983). Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian approach to Advaitic experience* (ISPCK, 2007).
- 10 Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Chapman, 1994), p. 545.
- 11 See Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (SCM, 1974).

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