THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Knowing the Father

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

I Believe in God

You believe in God. You have probably said this sentence hundreds of times, in the Creed at Mass, in private conversation, on a survey form somewhere. You mean it. You are not lying.

But here is the question almost no one asks you: which God?

Because the God you actually carry around in your head, the one your inner life is organized around, the one you pray to or avoid praying to, the one you imagine watching you, that God may not bear much resemblance to the God of Christianity. He may be a composite figure assembled before you were old enough to notice: a stern grandfather from a children's Bible, a wagging finger from a second-grade teacher, the face of your actual father grafted on, a vague cosmic presence absorbed from movies and pop culture, a few sentences from a homily that landed wrong twenty years ago.

That figure is not God. He is a costume God is wearing in your imagination, sewn together from sources God did not authorize.

This matters because you do not relate to God as He is. You relate to that figure. Every time you pray, you pray to him. Every time you feel guilty, you feel it before him. Every time you avoid the sacraments, you are avoiding him. Your interior life is built around a person who, in significant ways, is not real.

Most of the difficulty of the spiritual life, for most men, is not unbelief. It is believing in the wrong God.

This book is an attempt to clear the screen.

We will go through three of the most common false Gods that modern men carry, the Angry Judge, the Distant Clockmaker, and the Cosmic Vending Machine. We will see where each one comes from, why it isn't true, and how Jesus directly corrects it. Then we will spend the second half of the book looking at the God who actually exists, the God Jesus came to reveal: Creator, Sustainer, Father, Love.

I will not be giving you new theology. Everything in this book has been taught by the Catholic Church for two thousand years. What I am hoping to do is something simpler: get the figure in your head to match the God who is actually there. Because if you knew Him as He is, almost everything else in your life would reorganize itself around that knowledge.

You believe in God. Let's find out who you believe in.

C H A P T E R O N E

The God You Inherited

The Cardboard in the Closet

You did not choose your first image of God. It was already in you before you were old enough to evaluate it.

If you were raised Catholic, your earliest impressions of God probably came from some combination of these: a coloring-book drawing of an old man with a white beard on a cloud, a few flannel-board Bible stories featuring smiting and floods, your mother's tone when she said "God is watching you," your father's relationship with the Church (whatever that was), a CCD teacher who explained Confession in a way that made you afraid of it, and the general atmosphere of seriousness or fear or boredom that hung around the word "God" in your childhood home.

If you weren't raised Catholic, the inputs were different but the dynamic was the same. A grandfather's religious comments. A friend's family's intensity. A scene from a movie. A YouTube video. A pastor on TV your parents argued about. Something happened, and a figure took shape.

By the time you were ten, the figure was in place. It is mostly still in place. The fact that you have, since then, taken courses, read books, prayed prayers, and gone to Mass for thirty years has not necessarily replaced it. Adult learning lays a layer on top. The childhood figure keeps running underneath, doing most of the actual emotional work of your relationship with God.

Why This Is a Problem

The childhood figure was assembled by a child, from whatever materials were lying around. It is not a portrait of God. It is a portrait of what a child managed to put together from incomplete and often distorted inputs. Treating it as God is like treating a kindergartener's drawing of your father as your father.

The deeper problem is that the figure is usually a projection of someone. If your dad was distant and judgmental, your God will tend to be distant and judgmental. If your mom was anxious and demanding, your God will tend to be anxious and demanding. If your earliest authority figures were warm but inconsistent, your God will tend to be warm but inconsistent. You did not consciously choose any of this. It just got laid down underneath, like the wiring of a house.

We tend to become like the God we worship. Which is a problem if the God we worship is not real.

The work of the Christian life, in significant part, is the slow replacement of the inherited God with the real God. This does not happen by accident. It does not happen because you went to Mass last Sunday. It happens because you deliberately, over years, allow Christ to reveal who His Father actually is, and you allow that revelation to displace the figure you came in with.

How to Begin

Sit down for ten minutes and try to describe the God you actually relate to. Not the God you would describe to someone else in a theology conversation. The God you feel when you pray. The God who is in the room when you confess a sin. The God you assume is watching you when you make a decision you would not want Him to see.

Write it down. What is His face like? Is He angry? Bored? Watching with interest? Disappointed? Absent? Hard to find?

Whatever shows up on the page is not God. It is the figure you have been carrying. The next nine chapters are about who God actually is, so that, slowly, the figure can be replaced.

C H A P T E R T W O

The Angry Judge

The First Distortion

The most common false God in the inner life of a Catholic man is a courtroom prosecutor.

This God watches your behavior closely. He keeps a list. He notices the things you do wrong, and remembers them, and refers back to the list when you approach Him. He is not interested in you, exactly; He is interested in your compliance. When you sin, He is angry. When you do well, He is mollified but never quite satisfied, because He knows the next failure is coming.

If this is your God, you will recognize the signs. You avoid prayer when you have sinned, because you don't want to face Him. You confess your sins quickly and get out of the confessional fast, because the encounter is painful. You suspect, deep down, that God is mostly disappointed in you. When something bad happens in your life, you wonder, briefly, if it is punishment.

This God is not the God of Christianity.

Where He Comes From

The Angry Judge is usually assembled from three sources.

First, an angry father. If the most powerful man in your childhood was unpredictable, harsh, or critical, your imagination borrowed his face for God. The borrowing was unconscious and complete. You may have spent forty years not noticing that the God in your head looks exactly like your dad in a bad mood.

Second, certain ways of teaching the faith that emphasized guilt and judgment without proportional emphasis on mercy and love. There is a real tradition of fire-and-brimstone preaching in Catholicism. Used badly, it produces men whose entire conception of God is the fire and the brimstone, with very little else.

Third, your own conscience speaking and being mistaken for God's voice. When you feel guilty, the guilt has a voice. That voice is often not God; it is your own internal accuser, which can be much harsher than God ever is. A man can spend his whole life mistaking his anxious conscience for the voice of his Creator.

Why It Isn't True

The clearest correction Jesus offers to the Angry Judge is the parable of the Prodigal Son. The son leaves, blows the inheritance on prostitutes and dissipation, ends up feeding pigs and eating their food. He decides to go home and beg to be a servant. He rehearses his speech.

He never gets to finish the speech. The father, watching the road, sees him from far away, runs to him, embraces him, will not even let him finish his confession. Calls for the best robe. Throws a party.

This is not a sentimental flourish. This is Jesus explicitly answering the question: what is God like, when you come home after sinning badly? And the answer is: He runs. He has been watching the road. He cuts off your apology because He wants to celebrate.

While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. — Luke 15:20

The Angry Judge is not God. The running father is God. If your inner image of God does not have this kind of warmth in it, that image needs replacement.

How to Begin Replacing Him

Read the Gospels, slowly, with attention to how Jesus treats sinners. Not the religious authorities; the actual sinners. The tax collectors. The prostitute who washes His feet. The woman at the well. The thief on the cross. Look at how He addresses them. The tone. The body language. The complete absence of contempt.

That tone is the tone of the Father. That is who is waiting in the confessional. Not a prosecutor. A father who has been watching the road.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

The Distant Clockmaker

The Second Distortion

The second great false God of modern men is a deity who made the universe, set it running, and walked away.

This God exists, technically. He started everything. He may be impressive in some abstract way. But He is not involved. He does not pay attention to your particular life. He does not hear your prayers, or if He hears them, He does not act on them. The universe, in this picture, is a wound watch. God wound it. God is now elsewhere. You are on your own.

If this is your God, you will recognize the signs. You believe in God, technically, but you do not really expect Him to do anything. You pray rarely, because prayer feels like talking to nobody. When you go to Mass, the words feel like a memorial to something that happened long ago rather than an encounter with someone currently present. You make decisions as if God were not in the room, because in your inner picture, He isn't.

This God is also not the God of Christianity.

Where He Comes From

The Clockmaker God was largely invented by the Enlightenment. Eighteenth-century philosophers, embarrassed by the supernatural claims of Christianity but unwilling to be atheists, proposed a God who was just intelligent enough to design the universe but had since gone away. This God could be acknowledged at dinner parties without offending anyone. He made no demands. He answered no prayers.

For the modern man, the Clockmaker often comes from two additional places.

First, an absent father. If your father was physically present but emotionally elsewhere, if he provided but did not engage, if he was a paycheck and a silhouette in front of the television, your imagination borrowed his pattern for God. God exists but does not engage. He is the cosmic version of the father who never came to your games.

Second, prayers that seemed unanswered. Most men have, at some point in life, prayed hard for something and not received it. A parent's illness. A marriage. A child's safety. A career. When the prayer seemed to go nowhere, the conclusion was quietly drawn: this is not really working. God is not really listening. He must be elsewhere.

Why It Isn't True

The clearest correction Jesus offers to the Clockmaker is the Incarnation itself. God became a man. The Creator of the universe took on a human body, was born in a stable, grew up in a backwater town, walked dusty roads, ate fish with His friends, and died on a cross in a public execution. This is not the action of an absent God. This is the action of a God who is interested to the point of climbing into the wreckage with you.

And Jesus says, repeatedly, that the Father is not somewhere else. He is the Vine, and we are the branches. He is the Bread come down from heaven. He is with us, He says, to the end of the age. He sees the sparrow fall. He has counted the hairs on your head.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. — Matthew 10:29-30

The God of Christianity is not absent. He is so present, so attentive, so engaged in the texture of your particular life, that the level of His attention would unnerve you if you saw it clearly.

How to Begin Replacing Him

When you pray, pray as if He is in the room. Not as a polite performance, as a fact. He is. The Eucharist is not a memorial; it is His actual presence under the appearance of bread. The confessional is not a counselor's office; it is the place where He, personally, absolves you. The next conversation you have with your wife is happening in His presence. The next decision at work is being made under His attention.

If this feels strange at first, that is because the Clockmaker has been running underneath for a long time. Push through. Pray as if He is listening, because He is, and notice what happens.

C H A P T E R F O U R

The Cosmic Vending Machine

The Third Distortion

The third great false God is a service provider.

This God exists to give you things. You put in the right inputs, prayers, Mass attendance, moral behavior, the rosary, donations to good causes, and the outputs come down the chute: the promotion, the safe pregnancy, the healed back, the obedient teenager, the comfortable retirement. This is what God is for. The transaction is the relationship.

If this is your God, you will recognize the signs. You pray most intensely when you want something. You feel betrayed when prayers go unanswered, as if the machine cheated you. You suspect that other people who are doing better than you must be doing the prayer math more correctly. You measure your religious life by what it has gotten you.

This God is also not the God of Christianity. He may be the most subtly destructive of the three false Gods, because he can be confused with piety. The man who goes to Mass weekly, prays the rosary daily, and donates to the parish can still, underneath, be relating to God as a vending machine. The behavior is right. The relationship is wrong.

Where He Comes From

The Vending Machine has two main sources.

First, a particular reading of Scripture that treats every promise of God as a guarantee of earthly outcomes. "Ask and you shall receive" gets cut out of its context and turned into a money-back warranty. Various forms of the "prosperity gospel," more common in Protestant circles but present in Catholic ones too, teach a version of this explicitly: God wants you to be rich, healthy, and successful, and the right religious practices will deliver these.

Second, the broader consumer culture you grew up in. Everything else in modern life is transactional. You put in money; you get coffee. You put in effort; you get pay. You swipe right; you get a date. It is natural to import this logic into the religious life without noticing. Of course God works the same way, you assume. Everything else does.

Why It Isn't True

The Vending Machine collapses the first time you encounter the actual life of Christ. Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood, that the cup of suffering be taken from Him. The answer is no. The cup is not taken. He goes to the cross.

Paul prays three times that the "thorn in the flesh" be removed. The answer is no. Paul keeps the thorn for the rest of his life.

The saints, every one of them, suffer. Many of them suffer terribly. They pray, devoutly, for years, and the suffering continues. If the Vending Machine were how God worked, the saints would be His least credible advertisement. They are the opposite. They are the people who, somehow, came to love Him most through the suffering He did not remove.

Not my will, but yours, be done. — Luke 22:42

The God of Christianity does not exist to give you what you want. He exists to give you Himself. The difference is enormous. The man who wanted a vending machine and met the Father is in the position of a child who asked for candy and was given a real inheritance.

How to Begin Replacing Him

Notice when you pray transactionally, and ask for something different. Pray, sometimes, for nothing. Just sit in His presence. Say, in your own words, "I am here. I am not asking for anything. I just want to be with You for a few minutes." The act of doing this, even badly, even with a wandering mind, gradually reshapes the relationship.

When a prayer goes unanswered, do not conclude the machine is broken. Conclude that you were never dealing with a machine. The God you are dealing with is more interesting than that. He is doing something in your life that you cannot yet see, and the unanswered prayer may be part of it.

C H A P T E R F I V E

He Who Is

Creator and Sustainer

Now to the God who actually exists.

Begin here: existence is strange. The fact that there is something rather than nothing, that the universe is here at all, is not normal. Most possible realities involve no universe at all. The default state of things, if there were such a state, would be emptiness. Instead, there is everything. Galaxies. Oceans. Children. You.

Christianity proposes an answer to why this is the case. The answer is that there is one Being whose nature is to exist. He does not exist because something else made Him exist. He just exists, necessarily, the way two plus two necessarily equals four. And He, freely, chose to make everything else.

This Being is what we mean by God.

The Burning Bush

In the Book of Exodus, Moses encounters this Being in a bush that burns without being consumed. He asks what name to give Him. The answer is: "I AM WHO I AM." Tell them I AM has sent you.

This is not a polite refusal to give a name. It is a name. It is, possibly, the most important sentence in the entire Old Testament. God is naming Himself, and the name He uses is the most radical claim possible about His nature: I am the One who simply is. Everything else exists derivatively, contingently, because of something else. I am the source.

The Catholic philosophical tradition spent centuries thinking through what this means. Aquinas's whole metaphysics is essentially an unpacking of the Burning Bush. There is a Being whose essence is existence. Everything else exists because that Being holds it in existence.

I am who I am. — Exodus 3:14

Sustainer

Here is the part most modern men have not internalized.

God did not just create the universe once, in the past, and then leave it running. He sustains it in existence at every moment. The reason there is still something rather than nothing is

that God is, right now, actively willing the universe into being. If He withdrew that willing for a single instant, everything, the stars, the planet, your body, this book, would simply not be.

Aquinas put it this way: creation is not an event in the past. It is an ongoing relationship. The universe is continuously created, every moment, by God's continuous choice that it exist.

This is a strange thought, and it takes a while to absorb. Try it from the other direction. Right now, you exist. You did not have to. Three hundred years ago, you didn't. A thousand years from now, in this current body, you won't. The fact that you, specifically, exist right now is a free, deliberate, continuing choice that God is making. He is willing your existence, this second, while you read this sentence. If He stopped, you would stop.

This means several things at once.

It means you are wanted. Not in some sentimental sense. In the most concrete possible sense: God is actively, this instant, choosing that you be. He is not putting up with your existence. He is causing it. There is no version of right now in which you exist by accident or against His will. Your being here is, at every moment, a yes from Him.

It means you cannot escape His attention. Not because He is watching from a distance, but because He is the very ground on which you stand, the very being of your being. There is no atom of you that is not maintained by Him. You could not be more known. You could not be more held.

It means existence itself is grace. Before any other gift, before forgiveness, before salvation, before love, there is the prior gift of being. You exist, gratuitously, because Someone is choosing you exist. Everything else in the spiritual life rests on this.

How to Pray It

Sit, sometime this week, and try this. Become aware that you are breathing. Become aware that you exist. Then say, slowly: "Lord, You are willing me to be, right now. Thank You."

That is it. That is the prayer. It is the beginning of knowing the real God.

C H A P T E R S I X

Father

The Most Radical Word in the New Testament

The God of the philosophers is impressive. The Being whose nature is to exist, the Sustainer of all that is, the Uncaused Cause, all of these are accurate. They are also cold.

Christianity then makes a much more startling claim: this Being is your Father.

Not metaphorically. Not in the sense that you can pretend He is, for purposes of devotional warmth. Actually. Literally. The same God who holds the galaxies in existence, the one you were just contemplating in the previous chapter, is, in the most precise sense, the Father.

This is what Jesus came to say. It is the heart of His teaching. It is the word He used when He prayed: *Abba*. The Aramaic word for father, with the particular intimate flavor a child uses when speaking to a beloved father. *Daddy* is too soft in English, but it is closer than *Father* in our usual chilly tone. Jesus said *Abba* when He spoke to God, and He instructed us to use the same word. The first word of the most famous prayer in human history is *Father*.

What "Father" Actually Means Here

This is the part where the inherited image often interferes. If your earthly father was a particular way, you tend to project that way onto God. If he was angry, God is angry. If he was absent, God is absent. If he was demanding, God is demanding.

Christianity reverses the direction of the comparison. God is not an idealized version of your dad. Your dad, if he was any kind of father at all, was a partial reflection of God. The Fatherhood of God is the original. Every human father is a flawed, partial, sometimes broken attempt to image something that exists fully and without distortion only in God.

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. — Ephesians 3:14-15

What does this Father look like? Look at Jesus. The way Jesus speaks of His Father, the way Jesus describes His Father in parables, the way Jesus relates to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, all of this is the actual portrait. The Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Father who knows you need food and clothes before you ask. The Father who, if you ask for a fish, will not give you a snake. The Father who already knows what you need.

He is good. He is not erratic. He is not stingy. He is not absent. He is not waiting for you to fail.

He is also a real father, which means He is not a permissive uncle. A good father wants his son to grow up. He allows the son to suffer when suffering is what will make him a man. He does not eliminate all difficulty. He is doing something deeper than pampering. The Father's love is fierce and formative, not soft and indulgent. That fierceness is part of the love, not the opposite of it.

Healing the Father Wound

Most modern men have, somewhere in them, a wound around their own fathers. Maybe a small wound. Maybe an enormous one. Maybe the father was absent. Maybe he was present but harsh. Maybe he was kind but weak. Maybe he was warm but checked out. Almost no modern man arrives at adulthood without something in this area.

That wound bleeds into the relationship with God. It must, because the same language is used. You cannot use the word "Father" without your earthly father showing up in the room.

The Father wants to heal that wound. Not by erasing what happened, but by being, Himself, the Father you needed and did not fully have. Many men have had the experience, often slowly and over years, of God reaching into the particular shape of the father wound and filling it. Not replacing the human father, but giving what the human father could not give. It is one of the great quiet works of grace in a man's life.

How to Begin

Pray the Our Father slowly, sometime this week. Stop after each phrase. Notice what happens inside you at the word "Father." Notice any flinch, any coldness, any blankness. That is the wound speaking. Bring it to the prayer instead of hiding it from the prayer. The Father is not surprised by it. He is waiting to address it.

C H A P T E R S E V E N

Love That Is a Person

God Is Love

There is a sentence in the First Letter of John that is so familiar most Christians do not feel it anymore. Three words: *God is love.*

We treat it as a slogan. A bumper sticker. A pleasant generality. It is not. It is one of the most radical claims in any religion ever proposed, and most of Christianity stands on it.

The sentence does not say "God loves." That would be a description of one of God's activities. The sentence says "God *is* love." It is identifying His very being. Love is not something God does. It is what He is.

Why This Is Strange

If you think about it for a minute, the claim is almost incoherent. Love is a relational word. To love means to love someone. There is no such thing as love without a lover and a beloved. If God is love, in His very being, then there must be a beloved in His very being, eternally, before there was any creation.

This is the deep reason Christianity teaches the Trinity. The Father eternally loves the Son. The Son eternally loves the Father back. The love between them is so total, so substantial, that it is itself a Person, the Holy Spirit. God is not a solitary being who decided, one day, to love some things. God is, in His own inner life, a continuous, eternal, total giving and receiving of love among three Persons who share one nature.

The technical word for this is *perichoresis*: the mutual indwelling of the three Persons in one another, eternally pouring themselves out and eternally receiving each other back. The whole of the divine life is this. There is no other content. God is, in Himself, an eternal exchange of love.

God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God in him. — 1 John 4:16

Why This Matters for You

The creation of the universe was not God making something for Himself. He did not need a universe. The Trinity was already, eternally, fully complete in love.

So why did He make anything?

The Catholic tradition's answer is striking. He made the universe so that the love already happening within Him could be shared with creatures. Not because He needed someone else to love. Because love, by its nature, wants to overflow. It wants to draw more into itself. The whole of creation, including you, is the overflow of an eternal love affair that was already fully real before time began.

This means several things.

It means you exist because Love wanted you to share in itself. Not because the universe needed another component. Not because God was lonely. Because love overflows.

It means love is not an option in the Christian life. Love is what God is. To enter into relationship with God is to enter into the dynamic of love that He eternally is. There is no Christianity without it. The man who says he believes in God but does not love his brother has, John says bluntly in the same letter, missed the entire thing.

It means the deepest hunger of your own heart, the longing to love and be loved completely, is not a malfunction. It is a homing signal pointing back to the Source. You were made out of love, for love, by Love. Your hunger to love and be loved is the trace, in you, of the Being who made you.

How to Begin Knowing Him as Love

Notice the moments in your life when you have actually loved or been loved fully. Not romantic infatuation; love. A parent caring for a sick child. A friend showing up at a hospital. A wife sitting with you through a hard year. Those moments were not just human events. They were small, partial participations in the very nature of God. The love itself, in those moments, was God Himself moving through the people involved. You have already met Him this way many times. You just did not know what you were meeting.

C H A P T E R E I G H T

Holy

The Other Side of God

So far this might sound too warm. The God who is Love. The Father running down the road. The Source of being who chose to make you because love overflows.

All of it is true. And it would, by itself, be incomplete.

The same Bible that says God is love also calls Him, repeatedly, *holy*. The seraphim around the throne, in Isaiah's vision, are not crying "love, love, love." They are crying "holy, holy, holy." Three times, because in Hebrew the repetition is the highest possible intensification. *Qadosh, qadosh, qadosh.* Holy in the highest possible degree.

What does holy mean? It does not primarily mean "morally good," though it includes that. It means *set apart. Wholly other. Not in the same category as anything else.* God is not just the best version of things you already know. He is, in His nature, off the scale of any creaturely comparison. He is so far above us that the appropriate creaturely response, in His unfiltered presence, is to fall on one's face.

Isaiah, on seeing the vision, does not say, "What a lovely God." He says, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips." Moses, at the Burning Bush, hides his face. Peter, when he realizes what kind of Person is in the boat with him after the miraculous catch, falls down and says, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." This is the consistent reaction of human beings to direct encounters with the Holy. It is not a rude reaction. It is the only possible one. Anything else would be a failure to see Him clearly.

Why This Matters

If you only have a God of love, without the holiness, you end up with a sentimental God. A God who is warm and accepting and does not really care about anything you do. A God who is, basically, on your side because He likes you. This God is comfortable but he is not real. He is your grandfather with a beard. He is not the One whose name Moses could not hear.

If you only have a God of holiness, without the love, you end up with the Angry Judge from chapter two. The God of fear. The God you cannot approach. This is what religion becomes when it forgets the Incarnation.

The actual God is both, fully, at the same time. The Being whose name Moses could not hear is the same Being who became a baby in a stable, lived under His mother's roof for thirty years, and let Himself be killed for you. The holiness and the love are not in tension.

They are the same God seen from two angles. The Father is a consuming fire and the Father is running down the road. Both are true.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory. — Isaiah 6:3

What This Means for Your Prayer

You may approach Him intimately. You should. He has authorized it. He has even, in Christ, made Himself approachable in a body, ate fish with people, let them touch Him, called them friends.

But the intimacy is intimacy with the Holy One. It is not casualness. It is not buddy-buddy informality. The men in the Bible who are closest to God are also the most reverent. Abraham, the friend of God, prostrates himself. Mary, the Mother of God, calls herself the handmaid of the Lord. Reverence is not the opposite of love; it is part of mature love. The deeper the intimacy grows, the more clearly you see who He actually is, and the more the reverence increases alongside the warmth.

The men whose relationship with God is only chummy have usually not yet met Him. The men who actually have met Him bow.

C H A P T E R N I N E

The Face of the Father

How Jesus Reveals God

The whole point of Jesus is this sentence, which He says to His confused disciples toward the end of His public life: *"Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father."*

He is not being mystical. He is being precise. If you want to know what God is like, do not consult your inherited childhood image. Do not consult your projections from your earthly father. Do not consult vague cultural impressions. Look at Jesus.

Whatever Jesus is, the Father is.

The way Jesus treats the woman caught in adultery is the way the Father treats her. The way Jesus weeps at the tomb of Lazarus is the way the Father grieves. The way Jesus cooks breakfast on the beach for the disciples after the Resurrection, the way He calls them "children," the way He restores Peter three times after Peter's three denials, all of this is exactly what the Father is like, because Jesus is the Father's self-portrait in human form.

This is one of the most useful single principles in the spiritual life. When you do not know what God is like in a given situation, look at how Jesus handled the equivalent situation. He has shown you. He took on flesh precisely so you would have a Face you could look at.

A Few Specific Examples

The Father is gentle with the broken. Watch Jesus with the leper, the bleeding woman, the demoniac at Gerasa, the blind man at Jericho. He never recoils. He always touches. He always restores. The Father does the same with you. Your brokenness is not a barrier to His approach. It is the reason He came.

The Father is fierce with hypocrisy. Watch Jesus with the Pharisees. He is not gentle. He calls them whitewashed tombs. He overturns tables in the Temple. He is, on certain matters, capable of a fury that should sober anyone who reads the Gospels carefully. The Father is not a pushover. He has a fierce love that opposes everything that destroys His children, including their own self-deception.

The Father weeps. Watch Jesus at Lazarus's tomb. He knows He is about to raise Lazarus from the dead in five minutes. He weeps anyway, because grief is happening, because His friend is in pain, because death is real and ugly. The Father is not indifferent to your losses. He is present in them, with grief, even when He is about to do something that will resolve them.

The Father forgives quickly. Watch Jesus on the cross. His first recorded words, looking at the people who are killing Him, are: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This is not a one-time gesture. It is a window into the Father's standing disposition. The Father is already disposed to forgive, before you ask. Confession releases what is already there waiting for you.

Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father. — John 14:9

The Practical Application

Read one Gospel slowly, this year, all the way through. Pick Luke if you want warmth, John if you want depth, Mark if you want speed, Matthew if you want structure. Read it not for the stories, which you have heard, but for the man. Watch how He treats people. Watch what makes Him angry. Watch what makes Him weep. Watch what He says when He is alone with His friends.

That man is the Father, made visible. The God in your inner life should look like Him. If it does not, the inner image needs replacement, and the way to replace it is by spending time with the actual Face.

C H A P T E R T E N

How to Begin Knowing Him

From Acquaintance to Relationship

This whole book has been about an image-replacement project. The God in your head needs to come closer to the God who is actually there. The previous nine chapters have given you the materials.

But knowing about God is not the same as knowing God. You can read every chapter of this book, accept everything in it intellectually, pass a quiz on the contents, and still not know Him. The Devil, as James says drily, also believes that God exists, and shudders. Belief is not knowing. Knowing is a relationship.

So how do you actually move from accurate information to actual knowledge of the Person?

There are no shortcuts. The same way you would come to know any person: time, attention, presence, vulnerability, repetition. With four particular practices that the Church has been recommending for two thousand years, because they are the practices through which He has consistently made Himself known.

Prayer

Not the prayer of words, though that has its place. The prayer of being there. Sit for ten or fifteen minutes, daily, with the intention of being in His presence. Read a short passage of Scripture. Say something to Him, in your own words, about your day, your worries, your gratitude. Then be quiet. Let Him be there. Do not chase experiences. Do not measure progress. Just keep showing up. The relationship is built in the showing up, more than in anything that happens during it.

The Sacraments

Especially the Eucharist and Confession. These are not symbols. They are the actual, direct ways God has provided for ongoing encounter with Him in the flesh. The Eucharist is His Body. Confession is His forgiveness, audibly delivered. Go to Mass weekly at minimum, more if you can. Go to Confession monthly. These are the load-bearing structures of a Catholic interior life. Without them, the inner project drifts. With them, it advances even when you can't feel it.

Scripture

Read it slowly, devotionally, as the place where He speaks. Not as a textbook, though it contains true information. As a letter from a Person who is trying to be known. *Lectio divina*, the ancient practice of slow reading, is the right pace. A few verses. Let them sit. Notice what stops you. Pray with that.

Other People

You do not come to know God alone. Christianity is irreducibly communal. You need other Christian men in your life, around you, who are doing this same work. A wife or close friend you can talk to about your prayer. A men's group. A spiritual director, if you can find one. A confessor who knows you. Other people are mirrors in which you see your own progress and stumbling more clearly than you can see them alone, and they hold you to the work when motivation fails.

Come to Me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. — Matthew 11:28-29

The Long Arc

This is going to take the rest of your life. The God-image you came in with did not get installed overnight, and it will not be replaced overnight. The work of slowly, decade after decade, allowing the actual God to displace the inherited figure is the work of the spiritual life as a whole. There is no graduation date.

But the work is not joyless. The closer the inner image gets to the real Person, the more the relationship comes alive. You start to feel that you are in conversation with someone, not performing for a portrait. The prayers feel less like throwing words into a void and more like talking to a Father who is, in fact, in the room. The Mass feels less like a routine and more like an encounter. Confession feels less like an audit and more like a homecoming.

That is what is on the other side of this work. Not certainty. Not the end of doubt. A relationship. With the Person who is, right now, holding you in existence.

CONCLUSION

Come Home

A father has two sons. The younger asks for his share of the inheritance, gets it, and leaves. He spends it all on dissolute living in a far country. He ends up feeding pigs, hungry enough to envy them their food.

He comes to himself, as Luke puts it in a sentence that does almost too much work, and decides to go home. He rehearses a speech: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.* He starts the walk home.

And then this:

While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

The son tries to deliver his speech. He gets about halfway through. The father is not really listening. The father is calling for the best robe. The father is putting a ring on the son's finger. The father is killing the fatted calf. The father is throwing a party. He has been watching the road.

This is the God you have, whatever your relationship with Him has been until now.

If you have been carrying around the Angry Judge, He has been waiting for you to come home. Not to convict you. To throw a party.

If you have been carrying around the Distant Clockmaker, He has not been distant. He has been in every room you have been in. He has been keeping you alive at every moment. You did not notice. He did not mind. He has been watching the road.

If you have been carrying around the Cosmic Vending Machine, He never was that. He was always after you, not your payments. The transactions you tried to make were small compared to what He was actually offering, which was Himself.

If you have been carrying around an image too small, too bored, too far, too cold, too anything, the actual Father is none of those things. He is the One whose nature is to exist, whose inner life is an eternal exchange of love, who created you because love overflows, who became a man so you could see His face, who is holy beyond anything you can fathom and gentle beyond anything you have known.

He has been watching the road.

While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. — *Luke 15:20*

You do not have to finish the speech. You do not have to clean yourself up first. You do not have to figure everything out before you start walking. You just have to come.

Begin tonight. Tomorrow morning. This week. Pray a Hail Mary and an Our Father, slowly. Go to Confession on Saturday, even if it has been a long time. Show up at Mass on Sunday. Spend ten minutes in silence with the Gospel of Luke open in front of you. Whatever small step you can take, take it.

He is already running.

✦ ✦ ✦