


Personal Evaluation

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Personal Reflection on Christian Spirituality by Caleb O'Loan

This essay looks at one way in which this module has challenged my thinking, two new spiritual disciplines I have found beneficial and three ways in which my inner life has been edified. I also make a small comment about possible changes to the module.

This module challenged my view that certain denominations have little true spiritual life in them. After reading chapter nine of the course notes, I was greatly impressed with the Eastern Orthodox Church and appreciate their Bible centred and holistic approach in seeking after God. I have had very little to do with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Based on brief exposures to it I surmised that it was empty and ritualistic, possibly because of seeing a great emphasis on icons and orthodox priests looking rather serious with long robes and beards. The fact that they place such an importance on the Bible greatly impressed me. They place the Bible on the altar during the service, read through the whole New Testament in a year and sing the beatitudes.^[1] I also respect the way they seek after intimacy with God through many different spiritual disciplines including repetition of the Jesus prayer.^[2]

A practical method of meditation I found useful was lectio divina.^[3] I particularly found the meditatio step helpful and refreshing. Connecting biblical texts with past memories is not something I have tried much. For me, this discipline makes spiritual truths seem more real. For instance, if I read that God is love (1 John 4:8) yet cannot bring to mind any instance in my life where God has demonstrated his love to me then I find it hard to believe. The same holds for all other spiritual truths. Connecting the Bible with past experience in a way proves to me that the Bible is true and helps me believe it. The course notes recommend following a pattern of biblical readings that are progressive and ordered. I now practise lectio divina on a daily basis by taking a small verse or phrase from the lectionary readings. I also use calligraphy to help absorb the chosen phrase.

Another method of meditation I found helpful was the Ignatian meditation in front of a crucifix where we consider what we have done for God, what we are currently doing for him, and what we will do for him in the future.^[4] I have found looking back over what I have done for God helpful. I am often very hard on myself and if I can detect any pride or apathy in any of my actions then I consider that whatever I did counted for nothing. In this way I often feel that I have done little of value in my life and feel dejected and weary. If nothing I do is of value, what is the point of trying? Looking back over my life and realising that, despite having many faults, God has used me in many situations is encouraging, and helps me to face the future with confidence. Looking back at what I have done for God also gives me a realistic picture of where I am so I can aim higher. Looking forward to what

I will do for God encourages me to be more like St Paul who said "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care" (1 Corinthians 3:10). This exercise really helps me see the bigger picture for my life and build deliberately and with care.

A subject I would like to see introduced into this module is the holiness of God. It would be interesting to look at how Christians down the centuries have approached God's perfection, his infinite wisdom, power and strength, and the coming judgement and renewal of all things. When the focus is just on love it is sometimes hard to think of God clearly. Many different people claim to have found the way of love, each by following mutually exclusive paths. The subject of God's holiness would help to draw a clear line between God's love and the 'love' of others. It may also be interesting to look at various believer's confrontations with the holiness of God, for example, Daniel (Daniel 10:4-9), the Apostle John (Revelation 1:10-18) and Pascal.[\[5\]](#) It may also be good to add a week's retreat to the module with suggestions of how to spend one hour a day for a week, where each day's meditation builds on what went before.

This module has helped my spiritual life by giving me new tools to aid in meditation, introducing me to new friends and giving me a better vision of the church. The different methods of meditation in this module have given me a set of tools with which I can spend time with God in a more focussed and fulfilling way. I have become familiar with lectio divina, which I now use on a daily basis. I also appreciate the instruction in lesson 16 on practising Ignatian contemplation, though I find visualising events quite difficult – this is something I need to practise. The reading of the Prodigal Son[\[6\]](#) has given me a deeper insight into that parable so that I can spend much time meditating on it, considering the many different aspects to it. I can also look at other parables and use a similar approach to draw out deeper meanings.

This module has introduced me to a lot of new friends throughout history who have followed hard after God like the merchant looking for fine pearls (Matthew 13:45-46). I have discovered a lot of new people that I want to find out more about and read their work: Augustine, Crysostom, Nouwen, Teresa of Avila, St John of the Cross and many others.

Finally this module has given me a better vision of the church. Rather than focusing on arguments and divisions between denominations this module has given a view of a church with members from across the centuries and across the denominations united in seeking hard after God. This vision helps me to think of the Church as truly being a body – with a focus, and united, every part working together.

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[1] Dewerse, R., *Christian Spirituality*, p. 35.

[2] Dewerse, R., *Christian Spirituality*, p. 35, 36.

[3] Dewerse, R., *Christian Spirituality*, p. 57.

[4] Maas, R. and G. O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, p. 177.

[5] Byrne, J.M., *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant*, p. 78.

[6] Nouwen, H.J.M., *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.



[Daughter Zion Speaks in Auschwitz by K.M. Wilson](#)





Daughter Zion Speaks in Auschwitz: A Post-Holocaust Reading of Lamentation [1]

In this very interesting article Kelly Wilson makes the reader engage properly with the suffering of the women and children in the book of Lamentations. By comparing the suffering experienced during the siege, sack and deportation of Jerusalem with the Holocaust – an event closer to us, with which we can engage more easily, Kelly Wilson helps us to move “from apathy to empathy”.

The article looks at similar experiences of women and children documented in Lamentations and in the Holocaust. For example, Lamentations tells us that some of the women were so hungry that they boiled their own children. In the Holocaust we learn of a Dr Perl who had to kill thousands of newborn children to prevent the death of herself and the mothers – the children would have been killed anyway, but the tragedy remains. We learn of the first child she had to kill, ironically she had been a doctor to the parents before who had trouble having a child. Then when they did have a child Dr Perl had to kill it as the Nazis killed pregnant mothers and children. We also learn about a talented 18 year-old violinist who had a child but because of malnutrition could not produce milk and had to watch her poor little baby die. This is like the children who ebb away in their mothers arms (Lam 2:12).___

Previous explanations of Lamentations have focussed on the suffering man in Lamentations 3 or sought an answer to the suffering. Perhaps seeking in the crucifixion a too easy – all is sorted answer.

Kelly Wilson tells us of a poem by Gertrud Kolmar, ‘The Woman Poet’. She says that we should not try to explain the woman’s suffering or try to make sense of it, but listen to it, acknowledge the suffering.

Adam Zachary Newton says that “To read a text... means bearing some burden of responsibility, believing oneself addressed, and thus answerable – to the text itself, or to one’s reading of it”. [2]

[1] Wilson, K.M., *Daughter Zion Speaks in Auschwitz: A Post-Holocaust Reading of Lamentation*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 37 (2012) 93 –



[The Oracles of Balaam](#)



Numbers 22-24

Balaam son of Beor is a curious character – a man of extremes. He was from Pethor near the Euphrates so hundreds of miles east from Moab. On the one hand he held to what God said. He refused to curse Israel against God's will. However, he was lured by power and money to go in the first place. Also later we learn that he taught Balak how to lead Israel astray.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Rev 2:14

An overview of the oracles.

Oracle 1:

A people apart – great in numbers

Not cursed by God

Oracle 2:

God has commanded Balaam to bless Israel, not to curse.

God is with them.

No divination will work against them.

Oracle 3:

Their king will be greater than Agag and their kingdom exalted.

They are strong and will overpower other nations.

Those who bless them will be blessed,

those who curse them will be cursed.

Oracle 4:

I see him, but not now... A star will come out of Jacob;

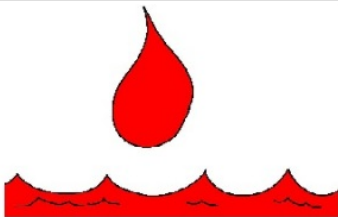
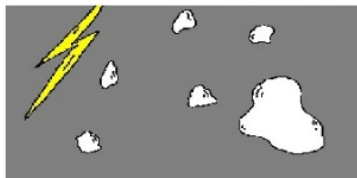
he will crush the foreheads of Moab

Edom will be conquered

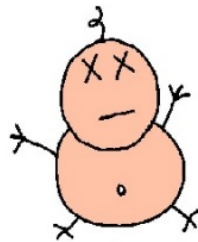
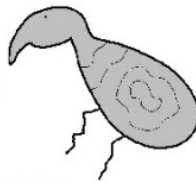
Amalek... will come to ruin at last

you Kenites will be destroyed

A Crescendo of Plagues



*The
10
Plagues
Of Egypt*



Aaron's Staff Becomes a Snake

Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts

Ex 7:11

Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said.

Ex 7:13

1. The Plague of Blood

By this you will know that I am the Lord Ex 7:17

But the Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart became hard Ex 7:22

2. The Plague of Frogs

But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt.

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Pray to the Lord to take the frogs away from me and my people, and I will let your people go to offer sacrifices to the Lord." Ex 8:7-8

But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said. Ex 8:15

3. The Plague of Gnats

But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. Ex 8:18

...the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said. Ex 8:19

4. The Plague of Flies

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land." Ex 8:25

Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to offer sacrifices to the Lord your God in the wilderness, but you must not go very far. Now pray for me." Ex 8:28

But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go. Ex 8:32

5. The Plague on Livestock

Yet his heart was unyielding and he would not let the people go. Ex 9:7

6. The Plague of Boils

The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians. But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses. Ex

9:11-12

7. The Plague of Hail

But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. Ex 9:16

Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the Lord hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside. Ex 9:20

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. "This time I have sinned," he said to them. "The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the Lord, for we have had enough thunder and hail. I will let you go; you don't have to stay any longer." Ex 9:27,28

so you may know that the earth is the Lord's. Ex 9:30

When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again: He and his officials hardened their hearts. Ex 9:34

8. The Plague of Locusts

"Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials so that I may perform these signs of mine among them ² that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord." Ex 10:1-2

Pharaoh's officials said to him, "How long will this man be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?" Ex 10:7

Now forgive my sin once more and pray to the Lord your God to take this deadly plague away from me." Ex 10:17

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go. Ex 10:20

9. The Plague of Darkness

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and said, "Go, worship the Lord. Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind." Ex 10:24

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to let them go. Ex 10:27

10. The Plague on the Firstborn

The Lord made the Egyptians favourably disposed toward the people, and Moses himself was highly regarded in Egypt by Pharaoh's officials and by the people. Exodus 11:3

Then you will know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. Ex 11:7

All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave." Ex 11:8

Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh, but the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let the Israelites go out of his country. Ex 11:10



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