

CHAPTER I



Continue

*Will you continue in the apostles'
teaching and fellowship,
in the breaking of bread,
and in the prayers?*

I will, with God's help.

Keeping the Lamp Lit

Release: Meditations from Prison, Day 4, 1995



*Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit;
be like those who are waiting for their master
to return from the wedding banquet
so that they may open the door for him
as soon as he comes and knocks.*

— LUKE 12:35-36

“**B**eing” a Christian is a “doing” behavior. It’s not something I can simply be. I’ve got to get off the couch, get dressed for action, and then take action.

In other parts of the gospel, we are told not to hide the light of our lamps to let them shine. In order for my lamp to shine, I’ve got to keep it lit. How do I do this? Hitting my knees every morning before I do anything else is the first action I take each day. That gets my lamp lit.

There are many ways that I keep my lamp burning. Continuing to listen to God’s gentle voice throughout the day and trying to follow his directions are some things I strive to do. Helping, forgiving, loving, and praying for others are other lamplighters. Some days it seems that I never really get a good flame going in my lamp; those are days when I’ve got to keep asking God for a light.

Jesus told us that he’s coming back. Is this a trick? Is our Lord trying to see how many people he can catch off guard? I think not. I believe God is giving us ample time to “light our lamps.”

Come to Supper!

Release: Meditations from Prison, Day 14, 1995



*And the angel said to me,
“Write this: Blessed are those who are
invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”
And he said to me, “These are true words of God.”*

— REVELATION 19:9

The book of Revelation has always scared me. Still does. I can't help but focus on all the destruction and death that takes place. When I watch the news I think it is not unlike the chaos described in this apocalyptic prophecy.

There is so much pageantry, so many awesome visions, so many fantastic metaphors in this book that I find myself scratching my head a lot. What, exactly, is the deal?

Is God trying to scare us with the message he sent through John? I don't think so. I think, instead, that God is telling us how, ultimately, good will triumph over evil.

We, the church, are someday going to be wed with Jesus.

We will be invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. What do we do in the meantime?

I find Holy Communion to be a most adequate appetizer for that final marriage supper with Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Lord, help me listen for your “true words.”

Forward Day by Day

Friday, March 6, 1998



“Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

— MARK 2:16B

I was writing a poem, and I'd come to a place where I wanted to use a synonym for God. I highlighted God and moved my cursor to the thesaurus icon at the top of the screen. I clicked.

God is not in the thesaurus, it said.

What? I chuckled at my computer's obvious lack of God-consciousness and began to get this mental image of God being everywhere, even in laptops. I've always thought God was in heaven and maybe in church. But he's also in here, where murderers, thieves, rapists, child molesters, drug dealers, and robbers live. Among society's outcasts, that's where I found God. (Actually, it's where he found me: God wasn't lost. I was.)

You know, it really shouldn't be surprising (but it is, isn't it?) that God could be in a prison. If Jesus were walking around today, what would people think about a son of God who spent most of his time in prisons, visiting the very people society had exiled? In crack houses? Shooting galleries? In parks with the homeless? Juvenile detentions? Mental institutions? Homes for unwed mothers? Slums?

To be Christ-like is to eat with sinners.

Jesus. Have you seen him lately?

Who have you been eating with?

Pass the salt. Thank you.

Forward Day by Day

Tuesday, March 24, 1998



*He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?"
They said, "Seven."...They ate and were filled;
and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full.
Now there were about four thousand people.*

— MARK 8:5, 8-9

Do you have questions? I do.

I think it's a long stretch of the imagination, seven loaves of bread feeding four thousand men. Then again, so was spitting in a deaf man's ear and restoring his hearing. Assuming the little girl was dead and not asleep, so was her miraculous recovery. Exorcising the neighborhood lunatic and placing his demons inside a herd of pigs, then driving them over a cliff...It gets pretty far-fetched.

Just about the time I want to give up on miracles as literal history, I think about all the sighted and hearing people I know who were once blind and deaf, who now see and hear with exhilarating clarity. Many of us were dead in a myriad of ways and are oh-so-much alive today.

Seven loaves. Four thousand satisfied stomachs. Is it a literal transcription of that afternoon, or some sort of symbolic parable? Actually, either way, it works for me. Sometimes I can say I believe and know why, and other times I can say I believe and still have questions.

Bottom line? I believe in miracles. That in itself is a miracle.

I have come to believe that deaths are opportunities for new births. New life after death is what lasts forever and reigns supreme. This has empowered me to live my life in a brand-new way. I am no longer afraid of dying, and he has opened up an eternity of living.

Forward Day by Day

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 1998



*Then he took a loaf of bread,
and when he had given thanks,
he broke it and gave it to them, saying,
“This is my body, which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me.”
And he did the same with the cup after supper,
saying, “This cup that is poured out for you
is the new covenant in my blood.*

— LUKE 22:19-20

As a young acolyte, the shroud of mystery surrounding these words captured my imagination. Father Bill and I would arrange all the sacraments on the little table. I'd count heads so we'd know how many “breads” to put out. I remember feeling a bit priestly myself as I would stand with my towel on my arm, ready to serve.

Our church was an old church, complete with open-face beams in the ceiling and lots of heavy stained glass windows. The result was a mystical, medieval look. Shafts of murky, colored light split the dusk-like atmosphere. I thought Father Bill, with his long hair and beard, looked a lot like what I imagined Jesus would look like. Then, he'd raise the bread and wine above his head into those different hues of inked light. Bathed in the unearthly glow, the chalice and paten were transformed. When Father Bill spoke, you knew it was a holy moment.

I'm more than a little sad that I strayed away from all that. But, at the same time, I'm thankful I made my way back to the altar.

Forward Day by Day

Sunday, April 19, 1998 — 2 Easter



*A week later his disciples were again in the house,
and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut,
Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."*

— JOHN 20:26

I've begun wearing a peace sign around my neck. It's a reminder to me. I can get so overwhelmed with all the complications of Christianity that I forget what it is I'm called to do. That's why the peace sign. It's a simple symbol of what my faith is all about. Peace is just like the cream in milk. If you let it sit, it'll rise to the top. Likewise, peace rises to the top when I let the milk of who and what God is be still and when I quit trying to stir it to my liking.

I can't begin to count the times I've sat in church just not quite getting the spark I needed that day. It wasn't that the sermon was a snoozer. It wasn't that the scripture reading didn't have a ring of truth to it. It wasn't the music. It wasn't the creeds or the collects. It was just that I needed to have Jesus put his arms around me and say, "Peace be with you."

So when it came time for the peace to be passed and I received that first hug and heard another's voice say, "Peace be with you," when I erased another's long face with my own hug and peace, or when I finally smiled at a person I'd been holding a grudge against, well, then I had a more visceral grasp on what it means to be a Christian.

Peace.

Silent Night

God Is Not In the Thesaurus:

Stories from an Oklahoma Prison, 1999

(Also published as a Forward Movement pamphlet in 1996)



*Then an angel of the Lord stood before them,
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were terrified.*

But the angel said to them,

*“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you
good news of great joy for all the people.”*

— LUKE 2:9-10

Christmas. I've got a friend who tells me he dreads this time of year. He gets angry when he hears all those Christmas songs. I don't understand. I wish I could feel the same chills run up my spine when I hear those songs in July as I do when I hear them this time of year. I wish the free-giving spirit that seems to prevail during this season would stay with me year-round, not to mention those blessings that come with being a prolific giver. Above all, I wish it were always this easy to love.

Of course it hasn't always been this way. Once Christmas was pure: the thrill of waking up at three or four in the morning to run into the living room to see if Santa had really eaten all the cookies, the innocent joy as my little brother's face lit up on his first few Christmases. He was so happy in his blissful ignorance of the future. I suppose we all were.

My girlfriend came to our house the Christmas I was in the ninth grade. She was the love of my life, our relationship dating back to the seventh grade. We crept upstairs, where we lay on the floor and kissed. I was the happiest boy in the world that Christmas.

Dad was in rare form too. The last few years I'd noticed a difference in Dad. Something was eating him up and all the whiskey in the world couldn't hide his haunted look as Christmas rolled around. The stranger who'd been visiting these last few years wasn't my dad. But this night was different. Somehow, I think he knew how important it was for me to impress my girlfriend, and he didn't let me down.

After that year, Christmas became hell. Booze, drugs, and a broken family took its toll on me and my Christmas spirit, and it wasn't long before I found a way to deal with life, especially during this emotional and turbulent time of the year. Life, especially the holidays, was a time to party. Staying completely numb was the only way to beat the Christmas blues and that was how I spent the next twelve years, and all the Christmases too.

In 1990 something changed. In April, after four years in the penitentiary, I'd made a tentative decision to try to get by without getting high. It was relatively easy, mostly because I was tired of the misery that goes along with being out of control of one's life. I was on what recovering alcoholics and addicts call the "pink cloud" stage of recovery—you think now that you've put the chemicals down, life is a bowl of cherries. As happy as I was, the closer it came to Christmas, the more I felt uncomfortable about it. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I knew I was definitely bothered by the impending holiday.

Fortunately, I was around a number of caring people who were also trying to experience a sober Christmas. At first I tried to hide in my cell and not let everyone see the tears welling up every time I'd hear a Christmas song—not only on TV, but for eighteen hours a day on the loudspeakers across the prison compound. I couldn't go anywhere the days before Christmas without crying. I hid it pretty well. By the time Christmas Day actually rolled around, none of my friends knew what was going on inside me. I was scared. There was this enormous amount

of emotion building up and ready to burst, and I thought there was something wrong with me.

Christmas night, after hiding in my cell all day, I was persuaded to attend a meeting of alcoholics and addicts. I'd been going to these meetings religiously up until then, but that night I wanted to be alone. I was afraid. I was terrified. The powerful passions boiling inside me were too much. I had to be the only person in the world this scared, and I was embarrassed to let anyone know how much I wanted to cry, how much I felt like a twelve-year-old boy instead of a twenty-seven-year-old man who had spent four years in prison and felt like he had to be tough.

As I sat through the meeting, I continued to suppress the rising wave inside me. I'd look around the room, and as I listened to others talk about how they were handling Christmas without staying loaded and numb, I began to realize this wasn't a bed of roses for anyone. People were telling how they'd been wondering all day what their families were doing on the outside and if they were missed as much as they were missing. I discovered that a lot of us had suppressed the spirit of Christmas during our using and drinking days and were now feeling overwhelmed with the power of that spirit. I wasn't the only one who was afraid!

As the meeting drew to a close, a man named Moses asked if we'd care to join hands, turn off the lights, and sing a song. Hesitantly, the words to "Silent Night" began to fill the dark prison chow hall. In an instant, the song took on a life of its own. It came alive. A bunch of ex-drunks and ex-junkies, thieves, murderers, rapists—society's outcasts—were singing like their lives depended on it. And they did. Suddenly, I felt a presence in the room. Someone, or something, was in the room with us, and it was powerful. Warmth flowed from the top of my head down to the bottom of my feet. As the tears rolled down my cheeks, I knew I'd just met God, and he'd shown me what Christmas was all about. As the song ended and the lights came back on, I looked around the room

at all the red eyes and glowing faces, and I knew they knew. I wasn't afraid anymore.

This Christmas, if you're feeling afraid, depressed, or if you just need to know you're not alone, hum a few bars of "Silent Night," and I promise you somewhere in an Oklahoma prison there will be a group of people singing with you. We'll be together in the truest sense of the word.

The angel was right. Don't be afraid. There is great joy coming.