

THE
Magnificent
JOURNEY

*Living Deep
in the Kingdom*

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THE WAY OF SURRENDER

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

ROBERT FROST

DURING MY SECOND YEAR OF SEMINARY, the spiritual moorings of my life came loose. I had been studying *about* God but had grown distant *from* God. I decided to go on a five-day silent retreat at an Episcopalian monastery in the Northeast to try to reclaim the spiritual warmth I had somehow lost.

Upon arrival I was assigned a monk who would be my spiritual director for one hour each day. He walked into our meeting room with jogging clothes underneath his cowl. I was disappointed. I had been expecting an elderly man, bearded to his knees, who would penetrate my soul with searing blue eyes. Instead, I got “the jogging monk.”

My director gave me only one task for the day: meditate on the story of the Annunciation in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel. I walked back to my room wondering how I would occupy my time with only this one assignment. *After all*, I thought to myself, *I could exegete this entire text in a few hours.*

What was I to do for the rest of the day—in silence?

Back at my room I opened my Bible to the passage and began reading. “Birth narrative,” I muttered to myself. For the next hour I spliced and diced the verses as any good exegete would do, ending up with a few hypotheses and several hours to sit in silence. As the hours passed the room seemed to get smaller. There was no view to the outside through the window of my room. Other rooms, I would come to find, had a beautiful view of the river that flowed adjacent to the monastery. Without any view to the outer world, I was forced to look within. Despite my hopes of finding spiritual bliss, I had never felt more alone.

*Why is it often difficult
for us to look within?
What are we afraid
we will find?*

The next day I met with the monk again to discuss my spiritual life. He asked what had happened with the assigned text. I told him it was just shy of disaster in terms of profound spiritual revelations, but that I had

come up with a few exegetical insights. I thought my discoveries might impress him.

They didn’t.

“What was your aim in reading this passage?” he asked.

“My aim? To arrive at an understanding of the meaning of the text, I suppose.”

“Anything else?”

I paused. “No. What else is there?”

“Well, there’s more than just finding out what it says and what it means. There are also questions like, What did it teach you? What did it say to you? Were you struck by anything? And most important, Did you experience God in your reading?”

He assigned the same text for the next day, asking me to begin reading it not so much with my head but more with my heart.

I had no idea how to do this. For the first three hours I tried and failed repeatedly. I practically had the passage memorized, and still it was lifeless and I was bored. The room seemed even smaller, and by nightfall, I thought I would go deaf from the silence.

The next day we met again. In despair I told him that I simply could not do what he was asking me to do. It was then that the wisdom beneath the jogging clothes became evident.

“You’re trying too hard, Jim. You’re trying to control God. You’re running the show. Go back and read this passage again.

“But this time, be open to receive whatever God has for you. Don’t manipulate God; just receive. Communion with him isn’t something you institute. It’s like sleep. You can’t make yourself sleep, but you can create the conditions that allow sleep to happen. All I want you to do is create the conditions: open your Bible, read it slowly, listen to it, and reflect on it.”

I went back to my room (it had a prisonlike feel by now) and began to read. I found utter silence. After an hour I finally shouted, “I give up! You win!” (though I am not certain who I was shouting at). I slumped over in my chair and began to weep. I suspect that God had been waiting for me to let go.

A short time later I picked up the Bible and read the passage again. The words looked different, despite their familiarity. My mind and heart were supple as I read. I was no longer trying to figure out the meaning or the main point of the passage. I was simply hearing it.

My eyes fell upon the well-loved words of Mary, “Let it be with me according to your word,” her response to God’s stunning promise that she would give birth to his Son. *Let it be with me.* The words rang in my head. And then God spoke to me. Some might say it was “all in my head” or “just my imagination,” but how else does God speak?

It was as if a window had been thrown open and God was suddenly present, like a friend who wanted to talk. What followed was a dialogue about the story in Luke, about God, about Mary, and about me. I wondered about Mary—her feelings, her doubts, her fears, and her incredible willingness to respond to God’s request.

This prompted me to ask (or the Spirit moved me to ask) about the limits of my obedience, which seemed meager in comparison to Mary’s. “Do not be afraid,” said the angel to Mary. We talked about fear. What was I afraid of? What held me back?

“You have found favor with God,” the angel told Mary. Had I found favor with God? I sensed that I had, but not because of anything I had done (humility had become my companion in that room). I had found favor because I was his child.

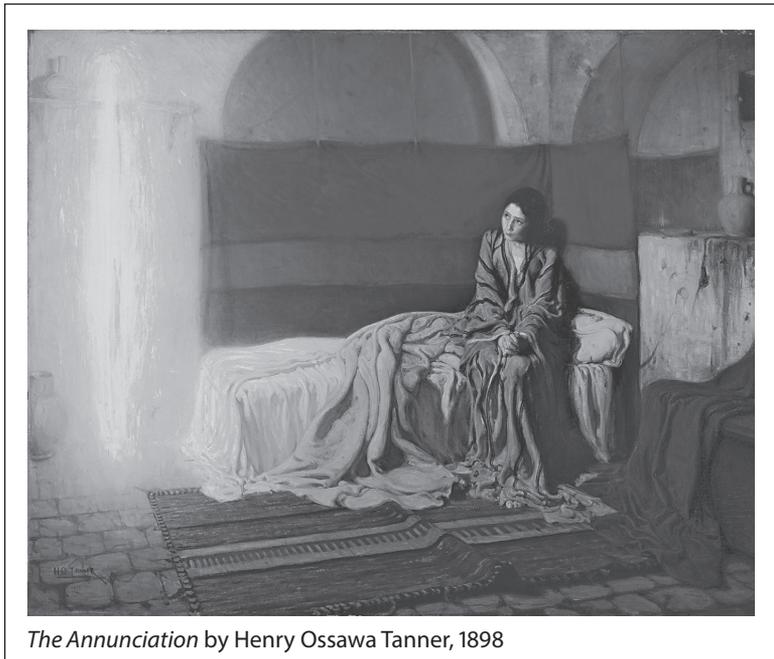
I wondered too about the future, about my calling. What did God want of me? Mary had just been informed of her destiny. What was mine? We talked about what might be—what, in fact, could be if I were willing. If I were willing. Like Augustine, who turned to the Scriptures after hearing a voice say, “Take up and read,” I had reached the end of my rope and was, for the first time in a long time, in a position to hear. There is much to be said for desperation, as desperation led me to begin praying. My prayer was really a plea: Help me. After an hour of reflecting and listening, Mary’s “Let it be with me according to your word” eventually became my prayer. The struggle had ended. I had a feeling that I had just lost control of my life but in that same moment had finally found my life.

The room that had seemed small now seemed spacious. The fact that there was no view no longer mattered. The view was wonderful from my vantage point. The silence no longer mattered, no longer made me anxious. Now it seemed peaceful. And the terrible feeling of being alone was replaced by a sense of closeness with a God who was, in the words of St. Augustine, “nearer to me than I was to myself.”

LET IT BE

My favorite painting is *The Annunciation* by Henry Ossawa Tanner. It is based on Luke 1:26-38, wherein the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to a Son who will save the world.

An African American, Tanner (1859–1937) was the son of a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Tanner grew up



The Annunciation by Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1898

with a deep love and knowledge of the Bible. He also knew firsthand the challenge of living as a Christian in a world of racial hatred and discrimination. He spent the latter half of his life in Paris where he found less discrimination.

Tanner painted *The Annunciation* when he returned to Paris from a trip to Egypt and Palestine in 1897. On that trip he wanted to see the Holy Land so his painting could be more realistic. Nearly every painting of Mary, particularly of the Annunciation, depicts Mary as wealthy, dressed in expensive, beautiful gowns, with a serene look on her face and a halo above her to show her sanctity. And often the architecture around her is grand. In Tanner's painting, Mary looks like an adolescent dressed in simple peasant's clothing, in a simple peasant home. It is as if she is about to wake up in her bed with a rumpled bedspread. If you look closely you can even see her toes poking out of the blanket.

In most Annunciation paintings, Gabriel is depicted as a winged creature of power. Tanner depicts Gabriel as a shaft of light. The light coming from Gabriel floods the room (notice the shadows), making the face of Mary the center of the painting. And it is the face of Mary that I most love. It is the perfect combination of fear and faith, of anxiety and submission. Many Annunciation paintings have Mary reading or praying or working, thus showing her piety and intellect and industriousness. Not here. Here Mary is doing nothing, as far as we can tell.

How did you first react when you saw Tanner's The Annunciation? Do you appreciate its realism, or do you find it off-putting?

I love this painting because it is simple and ordinary. As Scott

Lamb notes, "Tanner depicts Mary in a moment of peaceful submission to the will of God. But even in this, Mary looks normal in

the sense that we too could follow God's will for our own lives even as she did."

Long before the Beatles sang these words of wisdom, Mary responded to Gabriel by saying, "Let it be with me . . ." Let it be. I accept. These are words of obedience and surrender. It is a declaration of acceptance of God's will. It is an offering of her will and her life to God. It is in keeping with words her son would proclaim many years later when he taught about the narrow gate. It is the gate through which our magnificent journey into deep kingdom living begins.

THE NARROW GATE

The "let it be with me" movement of surrender is the starting point and the entrance requirement of the magnificent journey. It is a posture of obedience. To surrender and obey is the gateway to living deep in the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is the greatest teaching ever given, by the greatest teacher who ever lived: Jesus. The central verse of the sermon is Matthew 6:33: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." To seek first the kingdom is to desire to do God's will and to live in God's way. When we do this, we are living interactively with the power, provision, and protection of the kingdom of God.

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Later in this great sermon, Jesus tells his listeners, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are

few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). The narrow gate is a metaphor for choosing to obey the teaching of Jesus in the sermon. It is choosing to go the second mile, to give rather than receive, not to be angry with your brother or sister, to bless those who curse you, to forgive one another, and not to judge or worry.

As one commentator noted, “Jesus himself is the narrow gate through which people pass as they respond to his invitation to the kingdom of heaven. The way of discipleship then stretches throughout one’s years on earth, ultimately leading to life eternal.”

Stepping through the narrow gate is choosing to live as Jesus’ apprentice, to seek to obey everything he teaches.

Stepping through the narrow gate is choosing to live as Jesus’ apprentice, to seek to obey everything he teaches. If you stop and think about the kinds of things required as Jesus’ apprentice (stated

earlier), you can see the truth of Jesus’ words: “There are few who find it.” It is sad but true. The majority of people are not blessing those who curse them, much less even trying to do so. Though my assessment may seem harsh, this is also true of many Christians. Some have speculated that only 10 percent of a given congregation actually intend to obey these kinds of commands. I work a lot with pastors, and when I have shared that percentage with them, the most common response is, “Jim, I think that number is a bit high.”

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Choosing to live in obedience to Jesus and his teaching is, as Robert Frost put it, a road “less traveled by.” The road more traveled is the one Jesus spoke about, where “the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who

take it” (Matthew 7:13). Jesus is not being mean, he is being honest. As human beings we are naturally drawn to that which is easy. Due to the Fall, we are also living in a darkened world with darkened minds. We feel isolated and alone, afraid and anxious, and the world we live in preaches, “Look out for yourself first,” “Greed is good,” and “Nice guys finish last.” They are roads more traveled.

But they do not lead to a magnificent journey.

The road of self-absorption leads to a paltry journey at best, and at worst they are the way to destruction and ruin. Surrender and obedience to Jesus is difficult. To die to oneself, to take up one’s cross, is a “hard” road but one that “leads to life.” Unfortunately, “there are few who find it.” There are many reasons why people do not find it. In addition to it being difficult, it is also a road too few Christians even hear about. Dallas Willard often said he never attended a church that had a well-designed, intently pursued *plan* for making disciples of Jesus. It is often untried because it is unknown.

But it is the way to life.

We cannot enter into the kingdom unless we take up the cross. The cross leads to the magnificent journey of living in the unshakable kingdom of God. It is the unavoidable prerequisite. Again, to quote Willard, “Christian spiritual formation rests on this indispensable foundation of death to self and cannot proceed except insofar as that foundation is being firmly laid and sustained.” We often assume that dying to self will be painful. And of course it is. But what is the alternative? Søren Kierkegaard called the failure to do this “a sickness unto death.” Humanity, he believed, lives in a kind of despair until it finds its rest in the One who made it. This is similar to the penetrating insight of St. Augustine: “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

I can, for example, choose to navigate my life, live as I want, and aim at fulfilling all of my desires. This will result in that despair Kierkegaard wrote of, the sickness unto death. Willard called this a “dying self.” The wisest, best choice, then, is “the surrender of a lesser, dying self for a greater eternal one.” Or to quote the martyred missionary Jim Elliot, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

Formation in Christlikeness depends on surrender; failure to surrender is a sickness unto death; I can never find rest until I surrender; I am exchanging a lesser for a greater; and giving what I cannot keep in exchange for what I cannot lose is wise, not foolish. Deep reflection on these realities goes a long way toward helping me choose to take up my cross and die to myself.

THE COST OF NONDISCIPLESHIP

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a masterful book titled *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he attacks the “cheap grace” he sees so often among

What have you seen in your life as the cost of nondiscipleship?

Christians who ask everything from God and are willing to offer nothing in return. It is true that the cost of discipleship is steep, but it is also true that the cost of *nondiscipleship* is even higher. In one of my favorite Dallas

Willard quotes, he beautifully describes what is lost when we choose *not* to surrender to Jesus, not to live as his apprentice:

Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short,

it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul. . . . The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane.

When we don't surrender, we lose precious treasure: abiding peace, love, faith, hope, power, abundance of life, rest for the soul. He ends with "life on the highest plane." What could be more valuable, more desirable, more prized than this?

It is similar to what Jesus described in his parable of the treasure hidden in a field. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44). Imagine that happening to you. You discover a treasure of immeasurable value in a field. To get the treasure you have to buy the field, which requires you to sell all that you have. Would you do so with regret? Of course not. You would sell all you have and experience joy.

Grace Adolphsen Brame puts it well: "This yes is an inner assent of the will. It is a willingness to receive the grace and the guidance of God. It can be so deep and far-reaching as to cause a real conversion of life, a real repentance, a turning around to go in a completely new direction." The true meaning of repentance is to change your mind, then change your way. Jesus often preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). Change your mind, he is saying, about the kingdom. It is here. It is in your midst. You can enter it now. Taking this road will make all the difference.

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PRAYING FOR SURRENDER

John Wesley (1703–1791) was the founder of Methodism. He was a man known for his deep piety. The Methodist movement in England and in the United

States was one of the great movements in the history of the church. But Wesley was also an imperfect man, having many failures in his early ministry career. I find it encouraging to discover that our heroes of the faith were human. We fail, but we also get it right. One of the times Wesley was at his best was in his composition of a prayer, later called the Covenant Prayer (1775), which follows:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and
Holy Spirit,

thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

This is a prayer of utter surrender. It demonstrates great trust. In it Wesley is saying, “I will accept what you give me, *no matter what.*” This kind of prayer puts us in sync with the kingdom of God.

The second prayer of surrender that has been a blessing to me comes from St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). He was the founder of the Jesuits, a deeply committed and pious order within the Roman Catholic Church. Ignatius was going through a difficult time in his life, having suffered an injury to his leg in battle. He was feeling drawn to a life of complete commitment to God, but he had trouble leaving the comfortable life of a nobleman. He went on a retreat in Montserrat, and there Ignatius began to live his faith. He once spent an entire night in prayer before the statue of the Virgin. He put on simple clothes and gave his expensive clothing to a beggar.

Soon after, he began a period of eleven years writing what became one of the greatest works of Christian spirituality, the *Spiritual Exercises*. He, like Wesley, also penned one of the finest prayers of surrender ever written. It is called the Suscipe Prayer (pronounced *soos-keep-eh*, from the Latin word for “receive”), found toward the end of his *Spiritual Exercises*. I love the simplicity that underlies this short but potent “surrender” to God:

Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess, Thou hast given me: I surrender it all to Thee to be disposed of according to Thy will. Give me only Thy love and Thy grace; with these I will be rich enough and will desire nothing more. Amen.

Here Ignatius asks God to receive three aspects of who he is: his memory, understanding, and will. Like Wesley, he acknowledges that all he has is a gift from God; it is not his own. He surrenders

it “all to Thee” in trust. Ignatius asks only for these two things: God’s love and God’s peace. If he were to receive these in exchange for his surrender, he notes, he would be “rich enough” and would “desire nothing more.”

THE IMPERFECT WAY

With this arrangement of *surrender for joy*, of *obedience for riches*, it must be noted that this is neither easy nor done with complete perfection. I am sure that Willard, Elliot, Wesley, and Ignatius had their times of doubt, failure, and withdrawal. Ignatius wrote much about spiritual desolation. Even the great Mother Teresa wrote that she experienced times of struggle, doubt, and darkness. While some find this discouraging, I find it to be encouraging. She is a real person, a human being. None of us are strong and obedient every moment of our lives.

That is why I like the metaphor of a journey. We are travelers. We do not reach absolute perfection. True, we are called to offer ourselves “as a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). The problem with *living* sacrifices is that we sometimes want nothing more than to crawl off the altar. And we do.

The problem with living sacrifices is that we sometimes want nothing more than to crawl off the altar.

In “Hold Me, Jesus,” the

late singer and songwriter Rich Mullins sang,

Surrender don’t come natural to me
 I’d rather fight you for something
 I don’t really want
 than to take what you give that I need

And we struggle and fight and learn and try again. We are here working with reality. The cost of nondisciplineship will never go away.

It will take us a while to live as Jesus' disciples, but when we do, a magnificent journey awaits us.

In the chapters that follow we will discover the way of surrender allows us

- to grow in the grace and knowledge of God
- to live our lives from above
- to listen to God
- to walk in faith
- to live with hope
- to demonstrate love
- to experience joy

The magnificent journey will lead us to the way of life we have been designed to live, a life deep in the kingdom of God.



Soul Training Exercise
**THE SERVANT
OF THE LORD**

*I began to read the Holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all
other books, and praying over, if possible, every line and word.
This proved meat indeed, and drink indeed, to my soul.
I daily received fresh life, light, and power from above.*

GEORGE WHITEFIELD

AT THE END OF EACH CHAPTER I invite you to try to practice Scripture meditation. The practice is simple. Read a passage from the Gospels slowly, trying to see it unfold in your mind. As you read the selected passage, try to *see* what is happening in your imagination. Try to imagine the people, the places, the sights, the smells, and the sounds. Place yourself as a bystander in the story. In all but this chapter and the last, the focus is on Jesus. Notice what the people (and angel in the following passage) say and do. If you find something compelling in this practice, be sure to write it down in your journal.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's

name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

SURRENDER PRACTICES

At the end of each chapter you will find several ideas of practices to take up. This is not a to-do list. Allow the Lord to draw you to the practice that is right for you in this season of life.

- Meditate on Wesley’s Covenant Prayer until it is your own.
- Meditate on Ignatius’s Suscipe Prayer until it is your own.
- Meditate on Tanner’s *The Annunciation* painting until you can say, “Let it be.”

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