

# VII

## Fast-Bound to the Will

### A D H E R E N C E

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And all this brought our Lord suddenly to my mind, and shewed these words, and said: "I am ground of thy beseeching: first it is my will that thou have it; and after, I make thee to will it; and after, I make thee to beseech it and thou beseechest it. How should it then be that thou shouldst not have thy beseeching?"

Prayer is a true, gracious, lasting will of the soul, oned and fast-bound to the will of our Lord by the sweet inward work of the Holy Ghost.

Dear Julian,

I have come to your teaching on prayer. I feel released from the perplexing contemplations on love and sin considered globally into the personal contemplations of day-to-day slow transformation. Prayer is for me the mundane miraculous. When I was caught in circular thinking, prayer was a road away from a vicious ruminative roundabout into a new life. I have often tried to change, I have exerted my will, gone to counselling, berated myself and worked very hard at my perceived problem and I have failed to change. In the life of prayer, I have changed without exerting

direct effort. I had always thought that if I am bound, I should exert immense effort and flail about, and then the cords that bind will be loosed. I believed that only by extreme effort is any ground in life gained. Instead, it seems that as I come to stillness and turn inward, looking to Christ, something happens to the fabric of my being and the cords that bind melt imperceptibly away and new vistas open.

This banal act of the making of words on the tongue along with a movement of the mind towards Christ move me into his life where I have always been but did not see. When pondering what I want and how I could get it, my thoughts run away into distraction and dissipation (everyday all the time), but by relying on the prayers of Scripture and the church I am given a way of taking my desires back towards an infinite light. As I behold him in the simple turning, my understanding and capacity for seeing expands, and his truth, which includes all truth, is increasingly available to me within my day-to-day reality. My life has more space in it, more complexity and paradox; my desires are utterly chastened and expanded at once. This increasing spaciousness of truth is rarely perceptible, particularly in the experience of the moment of prayer, or in the time of distress or need which precipitated it. However, it seems that if I go on a bit in time this miraculous space is there, available within the self as part of the larger fabric of life. Memory as gratitude thus becomes, as you say, the true way of knowing his work in my life.

One of the most heart-wrenching parts of prayer is the chastening of desire. What I think I want is not God, but God is the source of my desire and God is the one I truly desire, for God is infinite room for life. However, I wish I could see clearly enough to ask for my life in such a way that it wouldn't hurt so immensely to enter into the process of receiving the goodness of it.

Let me tell you the hardest way that prayer has worked in me. For fourteen years after becoming a mother I was closed to the possibility of having another child. That which closed my heart included fear, work, pain and illness, and relationships. I know that there was sin in that closure and I know there is something vocational and good about the fact that I have only one child. Through my conversion, as I have told you before, we came to be open to having another child. I was an older woman, and I expected little. The process of coming to desire another child felt very much as you describe it, Julian. It seemed he wanted me to have new life, and he willed me to want it, and then he gave it to me. A moment after desiring and opening I was pregnant. Joy-filled weeks passed one to

another, and we were all transformed. Then we couldn't find a heartbeat. That week I was set to preach at the parish for which I worked. The passage was Hebrews 11:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.<sup>1</sup>

I prepared to preach as it slowly became clear that the being within me might not be alive. I knew very clearly that I was permitted and encouraged by God to beg with all my personhood for mercy and hope that the little one might live. I also knew that I was not permitted to stake my life of faith on the tangible conclusion. I knew I had to preach the suffering and true inheritance and joy of those who did not, in this life, see what they knew by faith, and I knew the risk in preaching it.

Hours after preaching we knew for certain that the little being was lost. It was and is devastating every day. For a long time, the desire for a baby became very central to my life. I could think of almost nothing else. But God had made me pray within a desire for God's will and life and God helped me continue to do so. I could not understand why the desire had been so beautifully and truly awakened, given, and not tangibly fulfilled. We were happy before the desire came to life, we were not lacking, we liked being three, but now we yearn for more.

I have not had another child, and the loss of the being given to us, subsequent losses, and the reality of a second bareness has been a great suffering. All through this time, in this awful and inexplicable strangeness, new life and new love and new opportunities to love and even new children (in one form or another) have come into our life. My life has been enlarged beyond what I could have ever asked and imagined. When I am still, I know that the life that I am in is the life I desired from the inception of this longing given to me in an inexplicable way. Memory, as it stretches through each moment of the past as gratitude, helps me to know his continual grace. The tension and the grief in all its awfulness (in every sense of the word) shapes me and makes me pay attention. The promise Christ makes to you he has fulfilled in me. He says, "Thou shalt have me to thy reward."

1. Heb 11:1-3.

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He wants us to have true knowledge that he himself is being; and he wants our understanding to be founded in this knowledge with all our might, and all our purpose, and all our intention; and upon this foundation he wants us to take our place and make our home.<sup>2</sup>

Dear Julian,

He wants me to have true knowledge that he himself is being. Prayer, you tell me, is the practice of realizing that he *is*. Christ is all that he says he is, all that the church teaches; all that I need to be *home*. This word *home* is infinitely important. How do I come home? The purpose of prayer is to adhere my will to God's. To know God as my ground is to want God's will. This is why in so much of this letter you are pointing to the second phrase of the Lord's prayer; "Thy will be done."<sup>3</sup> When we want God's will we are at *home* and when we are at home then we taste the bliss of heaven; being in God. Prayer then is preparation for heaven.

Perhaps in this way prayer is the process of purgatory. I bring my disordered desires, saturated with sin, and I turn them towards God's will. In the turning I am formed by the whips and bridles of prayer, I ask, and God answers in hard ways that I did not expect because my asking was clouded with sin. In seeing, I realize how blind I have been and how much of my life I have given over to nothing. The whips of realization of sin lead to the contrition that shapes my personhood. This contrition *is* in the presence of love, which bridles me and takes me into God's will renewing my life to its fullness. Prayer, as you describe it, is this movement of longing, trusting, enduring, and realizing.<sup>4</sup>

This Mount Purgatory of prayer is a hard place, but God's will *is* my place, my home, and this is where I am, truly alive and full. All of that sadness that I spoke to you about yesterday has made me realize my *place*. I did not start to pray hoping for this. But Jesus knew, as the foundation of my being, the nature of the fruition of this being that is me, and Christ

2. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, 94 (trans. Windeatt).

3. Watson and Jenkins, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, 250. Watson and Jenkins pointed me to the centrality of this line from the Lord's prayer.

4. When I speak of purgatory I am thinking of Dante's vision of purgatory and the whips and bridles of each cornice.

is bringing me home. You make it very clear that I will not get to the top of this mountain of longing in prayer in this life, but you also tell me that in gratitude I can see the one who holds me in place and in movement. Through remembering my life in thanksgiving before God, the past becomes available as life to me and the future is filled with hope.

*Oh, let it be so.*

### 43

Prayer oneth the soul to God. For though the soul be ever like to God in kind and substance, restored by grace, it is often unlike in condition, by sin on man's part.

But when we see him not so, then feel we need and cause to pray, because of failing, for enabling of our self, to Jesus. For when the soul is tempested, troubled, and left to itself by unrest, then it is time to pray, for to make itself pliable and obedient to God. But the soul by no manner of prayer maketh God pliant to it: for he is ever alike in love.

Dear Julian,

How hard it is to stay constant; I read your letter today and at first, I find myself bored. After yesterday's ecstasy of understanding I find it hard to focus; I want to run off and do something else. Why do this if it comes to nothing? As I write the word I am reminded yet again that *nothing* is in fact what I am being called *from* in this work. The nothing of sin, the nothing of disordered desire. However, all the nothing I seek seems far more alluring and tangible today than what I have when I am here: which is Jesus and only Jesus. I want security (personal and financial), I want the satisfaction of productivity, I want fusion with others that feels like union, I want honor, I want emotional intensity. I want these things. This work does not provide them. I may be *home*, but I am alone, in the confines of this small space, and I feel dumb plodding along at this. This is mundane; there are no thrills and no immediate gratification.

This is the long middle and I am bored. But I hear Christ saying, "Do your work, say your prayers, and stop fussing so much." Julian, I know your lessons on prayer are meant to meet me in the mundane. You are telling me that it doesn't matter how I feel, I must keep on praying. All I can pray today as I look at this wearied mixed-up mind of mine is "*Oh*

*God, I am bored, I wish you would increase the wanting of you in me.*” You imply that we can only pray as God moves us, so maybe this is the limit of that for which I am called to ask. You have seen God through your revelations, you know in truth what we lack. But I am trapped in the day-to-day, I can feel only my lack and my particular desire for release from boredom into life. However, you tell me that sensing the lack, no matter how we define it, is a spiritual movement, it makes us open and vulnerable. In our vulnerability we are called to name our lack in whatever way we can and we are called to ask God to fulfill it. We are invited to plead, beg, and long for release from our lacking because in our pleading we are turning to God and this is the fundamental life-giving movement.

But, you tell me, prayer does not make God compliant to my soul because God’s love is always the same. Prayer is *never* the fulfillment of a particular desire, no matter how good that desire is; our particular needs are not the purpose of prayer, our needs are only the means of prayer. The purpose of prayer is to be fast-bound to God’s will and purpose. This is the place of our being, our home. The gravity of my being in prayer is weighted to God. God will not change, therefore the promise is that I will. Thanks be to God for that.

My basic assent is so pathetic next to the beauty of your longing. I am frustrated that I am here in this stupid, boring place in the face of some of your most stunning depictions of union with Christ. This is a good that I cannot yet inhabit. What you describe here; this is the synesthesia of union.

And then shall we, with his sweet grace, in our own meek continuant prayer come unto him now in this life by many privy touchings of sweet spiritual sights and feeling, measured to us as our simpleness may bear it. And this is wrought, and shall be, by the grace of the Holy Ghost, so long till we shall die in longing, for love. And then shall we all come into our Lord, our self clearly knowing, and God fully having; and we shall endlessly be all had in God: him verily seeing and fully feeling, him spiritually hearing, and him delectably in-breathing, and of him sweetly drinking.

I am going to know myself clearly and possess God in full and be possessed in God! Oh, for this to be true! To be at rest, in confidence being true to myself because I operate from within the Godhead. To be possessed in God and never to be lost.

*Oh God, let me taste this beyond this lack in me.*

## 44

God shewed in all the revelations, oftentimes, that man worketh evermore his will and his worship lastingly without any stinting.

Truth seeth God, and wisdom beholdeth God, and of these two cometh the third: that is, a holy marvellous delight in God; which is love. Where truth and wisdom are verily, there is love verily, coming of them both. And all of God's making.

Dear Julian,

It feels as if you have reached the peak of a mountain; the air is clear and the atmosphere is light and in this place of prayer within Christ, knowing your self clearly and being possessed by God fully, God has shown you the eternal reality of our humanity: humanity works God's will and worships God forever and unceasingly. I am still lagging behind, this is such a strong statement, and very hard to believe, but you tell me that we are made to look for God, to pursue truth, live within wisdom, and find ourselves within love, and this is what we do.

I have to remember when you speak like this that God is all action, all substance, all life. Our souls do what they are made for because if we "do" anything we "do" the action of God. We have no other source of action and energy. Truth is present all around us. This means that wisdom is available, when we choose to stay within truth. Suffering and lack sometimes keep us in this truth against our will; making us wise. Wherever truth and wisdom are, love emerges from these. Thus, in good times and in horrible times there is truth (it is never of our making, it just is) and wisdom (either given to us as a capacity for staying with truth or forced upon us by suffering, which keeps us still) and love (the thirst of Christ drawing us into the Godhead) present.

Mary beholds Jesus with her body and her soul and in wisdom she stays within him who is within her. In this way she shows us what it is to be fully alive. Our life, which is truth that ends in love, was never ours; it was always given. Perhaps this is why you can say that humans are always doing the will of God and working to glory even when we do not know it.

*But God, if this is all true, why don't I experience it?*