

NEARER TO THE HEART OF GOD

# NEARER TO THE HEART OF GOD

Compiled and Edited  
by Bernard Bangley



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For Anna,  
whose life is a book of devotion



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## INTRODUCTION

Library shelves are filled with a vast treasure of spiritual classics spanning many centuries of Christian experience and insight. The famous and the obscure have already traveled the path many of us are stumbling along today. Fortunately some of our predecessors have recorded their insights and ideas in writing.

Unfortunately, many of the libraries that contain this written record are not conveniently located for us. Not only are the books difficult to find, but once found, they can be a challenge to read. Some works are not available in English and many that are suffer from stilted translations produced by previous generations. A modern reader, nurtured mostly by audiovisual media, opens such books and finds them forbidding. This makes the spiritual thought contained in them seem out of touch with everyday life.

Many of the classic spiritual writers are also held captive by the writing style of their era. Their words look stuffy and cold on paper. The reader may turn several pages before seeing a paragraph break. Sentences can run on for great length, strung together with semicolons and commas, until the eye and the mind grow weary of reading. But when such passages are carefully rephrased in our generation's conversational style, we can see the warm, loving spirit behind many of these "dark" pages. In some cases the release can seem almost miraculous.

What I have done is to paraphrase these writings into clear, simple, modern English. I have made the pieces accessible to people who might become bogged

down struggling with the original versions. I have shortened sentences and expressed the writers' ideas with dignified but commonplace language.

Language is a good tool for describing thoughts, asking questions, and reaching conclusions. Yet it sometimes can fall short when crossing linguistic barriers. Translating Chinese into English, for instance, can be a considerable challenge because of differences in word patterns. The English maxim, "Out of sight, out of mind," translated into Chinese and then restored to English, has come back "Blind idiot."

One of the great problems with spiritual literature is the inadequacy of language. Reducing an experience with God to words is an enormous challenge. In the same way that an eyewitness to a disaster stammers into a reporter's microphone, the mystics fumbled for metaphors and images in their attempts to convey a little meaning to others.

The writers of the material contained in this book have little difficulty analyzing and explaining important rules for Christian living. When they begin to pull back the curtain and show us something of their personal experience of an overwhelming reality, they stutter with a kind of colorful language that goes beyond ordinary conversation. I have attempted to preserve the varying styles in these modern paraphrases.

Although I have expressed the writers' thoughts and statements in contemporary English, I have not put any words into their mouths. Even when I have disagreed with certain aspects of their ideas, I have let them speak their own minds. The metaphors, examples, and illustrative comments in this book are in the original material.

It may be a little startling to read about dieting and family squabbles in works that are hundreds of years old. The reader may well wonder whether or not I have imposed these categories and images in order to make them lively for our day. I have not. Every reference can be found in the original. While freely paraphrasing for quick reading, I have resisted every temptation to introduce new elements. They aren't needed. These pages were lively when they were first written and remain lively today.

There is a page for every day of the year. Each page is designed for use as a private devotion. Read the meditation with an open mind and spirit. You may find that you are not able to escape the implications of what you have read for the remainder of the day. Go ahead and give God an opportunity with your soul. Be still and listen. Good things will come of it.

On the other hand, one page might lead to another. You may find the book hard to put down. This is beneficial too, and for this reason the subjects have been carefully arranged under thirteen headings.

*Nearer to the Heart of God* draws together some of the most important guidance ever given anyone who is new and inexperienced in the spiritual life. Aren't we all beginners? We are told about possibilities, things to expect, and traps to avoid. Some comments will sting, a few will amuse, and many will inspire and encourage.

Many of the writers included in these readings are well known. Their books will always be in print and widely available. Others are obscure. Few readers have ever heard of Evagrius Ponticus, Gueric of Igny, or Anne Askew. However, you will understand why a dedicated few have preserved the writings of all these spiritual

authors once you have tasted the little samples in this book. A list of books for additional reading (Appendix B) will help you to dig deeper. It is my hope that you will be motivated to read some of these writers in their original, complete works. I have placed biblical quotations in italics. You will find the specific references for these listed in the endnote section following Appendix B.

Bernard Bangley

There is nothing in the world as delightful as  
a continual walk with God.  
—Brother Lawrence: *The Practice of the Presence of God*

one

**BEGINNING  
TO DRAW NEAR**







JANUARY 1

Our soul is like a castle created out of a precious jewel. There are many interesting rooms in this beautiful castle of the soul.

How do we enter? Is that a foolish question? After all, if the castle is your own soul you are already rather intimate with it! What you must realize is that there are many different ways we can exist within this castle. You can remain with the guards in the courtyard outside the gate. You can live your entire life and never discover what it's like inside.

The doorway into the castle is genuine prayer and meditation. Mechanical repetitions of prayers are insufficient. They will leave you like the paralytic who waited beside the pool of Bethesda: He stayed there helplessly for thirty-eight years until the Lord himself came along to help him.

Teresa of Avila: *Interior Castle*



## JANUARY 2

There is nothing in the world as delightful as a continual walk with God. Only those who have experienced it can comprehend it. And yet I do not recommend that you seek it solely because it is so enjoyable. Do it because of love, and because it is what God wants. If I were a preacher, the one thing I would preach about more than anything else is the practice of the presence of God.

Please get started now. I don't care how old you are. It is better late than never.

I can't imagine how any faithful person can be satisfied without the practice of the presence of God. For my part, I spend as much time as possible alone with him at the very center of my soul. As long as I am with him I am afraid of nothing, but the least turning away from him is unbearable.

It is necessary to trust God completely. The various forms of devotion, as good as they are, merely help us on our way to God. But when we are already with God, they are of little use.

Don't be discouraged if you find this hard to do. If you just try it a little, you will consider it wasted time. Stick to it! Resolve to persevere in it until the day you die—no matter what!

Brother Lawrence: *The Practice of the Presence of God*



## JANUARY 3

There is a serenity of spirit that is extremely valuable in the spiritual life. It is not easy to acquire because we are inexperienced and face powerful foes.

Sometimes we are completely out of control. Our minds are confused. This is the time to get right into prayer. Remember how our Lord prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane before his betrayal. It is only in conversation with God that we can find refuge. Pray that God will replace the chaos in us with tranquility.

Don't be bothered by the continuous and meaningless hustle of the business world. When we go to work we can take care of business without getting rattled. We can lighten up a bit. We do not need to be intimidated by a crowded calendar. Some work can wait.

The thing we should concentrate on is an awareness of God's holy presence. A desire to please God should be our top priority. If we let other business take precedence, our souls will quickly become fearful and anxious.

Forbid thoughts that depress and distress you from entering your mind. Try to preserve tranquility. Christ said, "*Blessed are the peacemakers.*" God will surely bless your work and give you a peaceful soul. The only thing he requires of you is a genuine effort to still the storms in your life.

You can't build a house in a day. Neither will you be able to build this castle of inner peace in your soul in an instant. It is a gradual accomplishment.

Lawrence Scupoli: *The Spiritual Combat*



## JANUARY 4

Spiritual growth does not happen all at once. It is more like a developing fetus. Over time, it becomes like a human shape, but even when it is born it is not perfect. Growth continues for years. Think of the way seeds of grain winter over before they sprout. A fruit tree sapling takes years to bear fruit. Spiritual progress is a continuing process. It is gradual, incremental.

If you want to be a language scholar, you have to start with the alphabet. When you rise to the head of the class in reading and writing, it is time to begin Latin. At once you are a beginner again. If you master Latin, then you must enter the school for debating, and you are reduced to the lowest rank. If you finish with great scholastic success, you must still begin a profession as a novice.

The affairs of this world are conducted in a series of steps. In the same way there are many stages in spiritual growth. You will need to pass through many difficulties and tests on your way to perfection. It does not happen in a flash.

Pseudo-Macarius: *Homilies*



## JANUARY 5

May you be blessed forever, Lord God! Although I abandoned you, you did not abandon me. You held out your hand to me. I refused it. I did not attempt to understand why you kept calling me.

As the sins increased, I lost my taste for virtue. Goodness left me because I left you. You warned me in many ways with concern and pity. I gave you no attention.

O Lord of my soul! How can I applaud the good will you showed me during those years? When I offended you the most, you prepared me with an extraordinary repentance. You knew exactly what would be the most distressing thing for me. You punished my sins with wonderful gifts!

I had many friends who helped me fall. No one helped me up. It is surprising that I did not remain down. I praise the mercy of God. He alone extended his hand to me.

May God be forever blessed for putting up with me for so long!

Amen.

Teresa of Avila: *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*



## JANUARY 6

If you want to unite your spirit with God, you need to understand the true nature of spirituality.

Some consider only appearances. They concentrate on penances, vigils, fasting, and other physical deprivations. Others indulge in long prayers, attend public services frequently, spend many hours in church, and take Communion as often as they can.

These people are all misguided. These things are little more than the side effects of true piety. While these tools are useful in the spiritual life, they are not its essence.

They help beginners in their struggle against human nature, which is indifferent to good and inclined to evil.

They also are the precious fruits of the spiritual life. Many perform these things with no desire at all for some resulting sensual pleasure. They honestly want to know the grandeur of Divine Goodness and the depth of their own ingratitude. Such people want to increase their love of God while discovering self-denial. They want to follow their Lord, shouldering his cross. They receive the Lord's Supper for no other reason than the honor of God and a closer union with him.

It is quite different when we ignorantly think of our devotion as external acts. There is nothing wrong with these behaviors, but when wrongly applied they become a hazard. We can become so attached to these rituals that we completely neglect to notice any inner movement of our hearts. Then we become filled with empty ideas and think that we have tasted the joys of paradise and the delights of angels. We think we have seen God when all we have seen is the devil's decoy.

Lawrence Scupoli: *The Spiritual Combat*



**JANUARY 7**

If you love God, you will do everything possible to serve and please him. Love is impatient to do good. It is also quick and active and observant. Faith will encourage you. Hope will set you spinning like the spring in a watch. Reverence for God will rouse you out of your sleepiness. Enthusiasm

for spiritual things will set you on fire. The more aware you are of God, the more involved you will be in working for him.

Those who trifle lose their labor.

If two are running in a race, the one who runs slowest loses both the prize and the effort. If you are lifting weights and do not put sufficient strength into it, you might as well not try it at all. How many duties have Christians lost because they did not do them thoroughly? *“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.”* The difference may be in the dedicated effort. Give a little more diligence and strength in the application of your faith. That way what you have already done will not be wasted.

Precious time is already lost. For some of us, childhood and youth are gone. For some, middle age is also gone. The time before us is very uncertain. Only a little of our work is done! The time we have lost cannot be recovered. If a traveler sleeps late or trifles most of the day, he must travel much faster in the evening or fall short of his journey’s end. *For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love.*

Richard Baxter: *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*



## JANUARY 8

*But I don’t need to write to you about the Christian love that should be shown among God’s people. For God himself has taught you to love one another. Indeed, your*

*love is already strong toward all the Christians in all Macedonia. Even so, dear brothers and sisters, we beg you to love them more and more. (Thessalonians 4:9-10 NLT)*

Many people of this world seek to increase in their wealth and riches. They never think they have enough in the bank. In 1 Thessalonians, St. Paul is urging us to increase in everything that is good.

A child that does not grow bigger is pathetic. Soil that does not produce vegetation is sterile. The tree that is barren is cut down. Unless we go forward we slip backward.

John Jewell: *Exposition on the Thessalonians*



## JANUARY 9

If you have lived far from God, you may think you are very near him when you finally start a life with him. The peasant thinks he has been to court because he saw the king pass by one day.

New Christians give up their worst sins and break fewer laws than they once did, but they are still attached to the world. Instead of judging themselves by the gospel they merely compare themselves with their former lives. If today is better than yesterday, they think this is enough to make them saints. If they can tell you the time and place of their salvation, they probably see nothing remaining to be done.

Such people have a long way to go.

François de Fénelon: *Meditations and Devotions*



## JANUARY 10

Patience is a cheerful acceptance of frustration. A patient person does not complain about problems. Ordinary people always grumble about difficulties. They are looking for comfort in the wrong place if they try to find it here in this world.

A faithful person will sometimes have to face the scorn and slander of others. Patience is the shield against these things. Be ready to forget and forgive all wrongs done against you. Pray that those who hate and hurt you may be turned in a better direction.

It is not possible for you to demonstrate whether you are strong or weak, unless you are troubled when you are at peace. Many may seem to be patient when they are not being tested. But the slightest correction will provoke bitter wrath. Any resistance to their ideas and desires will enrage them.

Run away from the praises of others. Place no value on celebrity status and good favor. Gladly sustain back-biting and enmity. Look for your comfort in heavenly places.

When you are tempted or troubled, remember what our Savior said. “*Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.*” He did not say, “Pray that you will not be tempted.” It is good for us to be troubled and tempted. God will be with us in such times. He will sustain and deliver us.

Don’t get the idea that you are holy because you have been spared temptation. The holiest of all are the most tempted of all. The higher the mountain, the greater the wind. God plays with his child the way a

mother sometimes hides from a little one. Soon enough, there will be hugs and a wiping away of tears.

John Wycliffe: *The Poor Caitiff*



#### JANUARY 11

God did not put you in the world because he needed you. He made you for the purpose of working his goodness in you. He has given you a mind to know him, a memory to recall his favors, a will to love him, eyes to see what he does, and a tongue to sing his praise.

This is the reason you are here. Anything that hinders that purpose needs to be avoided.

Think of the unhappy people who miss this point and live as though they were here only to construct houses, plant trees, accumulate money, and waste themselves on trifling matters.

Scold your soul with humility. Remind it that until now it has been so miserable that it hasn't thought much about these things. Ask yourself, "What did I think about when I did not think about God? What did I remember when I forgot God? What did I love when I did not love God?"

Hate your previous behavior. "I am through thinking shallow thoughts and making futile plans. I renounce bad friendships, ugly deeds, and self-indulgence."

Turn to God. "My Savior, from now on you will be at the center of my attention. I will stop thinking about evil things. I will remember your mercy toward

me every day. The vanities I used to chase after now disgust me.”

Francis de Sales: *The Devout Life*



## JANUARY 12

After a soul is converted to God's service, it is spiritually nurtured and caressed by God. It is as though a loving mother holds a child to the warmth and nourishment of her bosom.

When the child is an infant, the mother carries it in her arms and caresses it. As the child grows bigger, it is weaned and encouraged to walk on its own legs. There is a natural independence that increases each day. Important steps happen: the child ceases being a child and learns to accept more important responsibilities.

A mother's love is similar to God's grace. When souls are warmed with a fervent desire to serve God, they are led by God to spiritual milk. Without any effort on their own part, they are freely given sweet and delectable spiritual pleasure.

Such souls enjoy long times at prayer and take pleasure in the things of God. But because they are not prepared, not mature, they may be awkward. Their spiritual activity is imperfect. Since they have not had the opportunity to practice spiritual skills, they necessarily stumble like children.

As these beginners are very enthusiastic about the devout life, they often feel a kind of secret pride. In spite of their immaturity and imperfections, they may feel a certain satisfaction with themselves. They begin to want

to talk with others about spiritual things. They want to teach rather than learn. They look down on others who do not think and feel as they themselves do. Their pride and presumptions grow. Virtues even become vices.

When another religious person questions their activity, they think they are not understood. Eager to be highly esteemed and praised, they imagine their critics are not truly saved.

John of the Cross: *Dark Night of the Soul*



#### JANUARY 13

All of the Israelites left Egypt, but in the desert many of them had second thoughts and wanted to return. In the same way, some resolve to avoid sin, but they look back at Sodom even while fleeing it. They give up their sins, but go right on talking about them, desiring them. If you want to live a devout life, you are not only required to stop sinning but also to lose your appetite for it.

The first step toward the devout life is the cleansing of your soul. *[Y]our foolish desires will destroy you . . . [Y]ou must give up your old way of life with all its bad habits.* Remove anything that stands in the way of your union with God. This will be a gradual process. It has been compared with sunrise, which brings light in imperceptible steps. A slow cure is best. Have courage and patience. The work of cleansing your soul will go on for a lifetime. Our perfection consists of struggling against our imperfection.

Think of the time before you were born. Where was your soul then? The world existed, but it saw nothing of you.

God pulled you out of that void and made you who you are out of his own goodness.

Think of the possibilities God has placed in you.

Francis de Sales: *The Devout Life*



#### JANUARY 14

The poison of a scorpion can be turned into its own antidote. Sin is bad, but it can be distilled by confession and repentance. Simon called Mary Magdalene a sinner, but our Lord disagreed. He was pleased with her humble act of anointing him with expensive perfume. When we are sorry for our sin, we honor God, and such sins, distilled by our sorrow, become sweet and pleasant.

It is important to tell the doctor exactly what your symptoms are. In confessing sin, be certain to tell it all, candidly and sincerely. This will greatly relieve your conscience. Then listen for any guidance. Listen inwardly for the Savior's assurance of pardon. Experience the joyous celebration of the angels in heaven.

The low angle of the sun early in the morning reveals the wrinkles in our faces. In a similar manner the Holy Spirit lights our consciences, and we see our sins more distinctly. No doubt you can see that you still have some proclivity to sin. We are never entirely free from these tendencies, but we can stop having affection for them.

Spiders are not deadly to bees, but they entangle their honeycombs with webs and make their work difficult. Tiny sins will not kill your soul, but if they wrap a tangle of bad habits around you, devotion will suffer. It is not earthshaking to tell a small lie, or to say or do something slightly risqué, or to dress, joke, play, or dance with a little freedom as long as you don't allow these spiritual spiders to spin their webs and ruin the hive of your conscience. Although it is not wrong to have a little harmless fun, it can become dangerous. The evil is not in the pastimes; it is in our affection for them. Don't sow weeds in the soil of your heart. Your garden space is limited.

Francis de Sales: *The Devout Life*



#### JANUARY 15

Strong wind blowing in the darkness of night violently disturbs every plant in its path. It is the same way with us when we give way to the power of the night. The devil's wind pounds at us, convinces us, shakes us. We fall victim to the darkness that is in us. We give in to harmful desires.

The Holy Spirit moves in us with a similar strength. But it is a freshening breeze on a beautiful day. It travels through every corner of the soul, bringing light, health, peace.

It is something like a change of clothes. We may be found wearing the heavy, tattered overcoat of bad language, skepticism, boldness, conceit, arrogance, greed, lust, and

all the other contaminated adornments of the kingdom of darkness. Jesus takes these burdensome rags from us. He clothes us with garments that are sparkling clean. We are clothed with confidence, optimism, love, gladness, peace, decency, human warmth, light, and most of all, life. In the same way that God is loving and kind, we may be also.

Pseudo-Macarius: *Homilies*



#### JANUARY 16

At the beginning of the spiritual life a common temptation is for us to want everyone else to be extremely spiritual. It is not wrong to want this, but it may not be right to try to make it happen. If we do, it is essential that we exercise discretion and give no impression that we are setting ourselves up as a great teacher.

I discovered this for myself. When I attempted to induce others to pray, they would listen to what I had to say. When they then observed that I, the great practitioner of prayer, lacked certain virtues, they would be led astray. My actions were not compatible with my words. A trifling evil can be devastating in a religious community. Across many years only three individuals have gained anything of value from what I have said to them.

We are also tempted to be distressed by the sins and failings of others. We try to fix things. This excites us so much that it keeps us from praying. Worst of all, we trick ourselves into believing we are doing the Lord's work! Good intentions have led to terrible mistakes. Spiritual

security comes when we stop being anxious about others and begin to watch after ourselves.

Try to focus on the best in others and the worst in ourselves. This will blind us to their defects. Eventually, we may even think of them as better than ourselves.

Teresa of Avila: *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*



#### JANUARY 17

A perverse will produces lust. Lust yielded to becomes a habit. A habit not resisted becomes a necessity. These were like links of a chain hanging one upon the other, and they bound me hand and foot. I had two wills: one old, one new; one carnal, one spiritual. The conflict between them wasted my soul. I was like a sleepy man unable to get up.

God convinced me that his words were true, but the only answer I could give was the groggy word: “soon.” But the word meant no particular span of time. *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* I refused to follow you, but my soul could find no excuse for not following. I was at war with myself in an agony of indecision. The familiar evil was more powerful than the unfamiliar good.

My introspection dredged up all the misery of my soul and piled it up in full view of my heart. A tremendous emotional storm arose, and there was a deluge of tears.

And then I heard the voice of a boy or a girl from the nearby house saying, “Take up and read! Take up and read!” Holding back my tears, I got up, interpreting the

child's words as a command from God to open the Bible and read the first passage I should see. I snatched it up, opened it, and silently read the first thing I saw. *Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

I had no desire, no need to read further. In the instant that sentence ended, it was as if a peaceful light shone in my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished.

Augustine: *Confessions*



#### JANUARY 18

Love God the same way in everything. Love God as quickly in poverty as in wealth. Seek God in sickness as well as in health. Look for God when you are tempted, and look for him when you are not tempted. Discover God in suffering and in pleasantness.

It is like carrying two buckets. If one is heavy, the other feels lighter. The more you abandon yourself, the easier it will be to abandon. If you love God, you will be able to renounce the whole earth as though it were an egg. The more you give, the easier it is to give. The followers of Christ discovered that the heavier their suffering, the easier they could endure it.

Meister Eckhart: *Sermons*



## JANUARY 19

Turn to God quickly and completely. Be converted to him. Do not keep procrastinating. It is a huge sin to expect God to be merciful while we continue a sinful life. It is a common mistake to think that the mercy of God is so great that there will be no punishment.

We live inside a tiny moment of time. All of our time, compared with eternity, is nothing. It is a serious waste to let a day go by without allowing God to change us.

Conversion is a total turning to God. This means we turn away from the world with its sin. If we choose to turn away from God, we ignore the good that never changes. Our affections and our behavior need to be changed.

You will be converted when you have made a complete turn toward God. Your mind will meditate upon him. You will understand that you live your life under God. The psalmist writes, *I have set the LORD always before me*. Notice that he says “always.” This is different from an occasional glance in God’s direction while preoccupied with the things of this world.

Again the psalmist declares, *My eyes are ever on the LORD, for only he will release my feet from the snare*. These words make it clear that if, we do not habitually focus our interior eyes on Christ, we will be caught in the snare of temptation. In fact, if our soul’s attention is not riveted on God, being completely converted to him, there are going to be some traps along the way for us.

Many claim to be willing to turn toward God but believe that responsibilities in this world prevent it. If