

What [God] asks is a will which will no longer be divided between him and any creature, a will pliant in his hands, which neither desires anything nor refuses anything, which wants without reservation everything which he wants, and which never, under any pretext, wants anything which he does not want.

FÉNELON

I should like to persuade spiritual persons that the road leading to God does not entail a multiplicity of considerations, methods, manners, and experiences...but demands only the one thing necessary: true self-denial, exterior and interior, through surrender of self both to suffering for Christ and to annihilation in all things.

JOHN OF THE CROSS

5

JOYFUL SURRENDER

Christian Submission



In 1654 Blaise Pascal faced his life's greatest test. His friendship with a duke had brought him into the highest levels of society, but the attractions and amusements of high society threatened his burgeoning spirituality. A letter Pascal wrote to his sister at this time reveals his inner crisis.

On the night of November 23, Pascal had an ecstatic experience that affected him for the rest of his life. In fact, he wrote down the insights he gained that night and sewed them into his jacket, transferring them from garment to garment as the jacket wore out. While he maintained some of his former relationships after the experience, he no longer felt any ambivalence about his call to surrender to God's will for his life and work.

About two years later, Pascal began making notes for what he hoped would become a full-scale apology of the Christian religion. He wanted to use the brilliant mathematical mind God had given him to defend the faith.

Pascal's notes now fill up several hundred pages in the book we know as *Pensées*. The scope of what Pascal intended must have been enormous because he stated that it would take ten years of good health to bring the book to completion—this

from a man who had already accomplished more in his first thirty-five years than most people accomplish in a lifetime.

The notes were made in 1657 and 1658, but in 1659 Pascal entered a period of serious illness from which he never fully recovered. In the midst of his illness he wrote, "*Priere pour demander a Dieu le bon usage des maladies*" ("Prayer asking God for the right use of illnesses") in which he tried to find a Christian meaning for his suffering so he could discern God's will and submit to it wholly and trustfully. In the prayer, Pascal asked God to dispose of his health and his sickness, his life and his death, first for the glory of God, then for his salvation and for the good of the church.¹

Pascal could have been bitter. He could have argued that God was treating him unfairly. He could have said, "God, I gave up everything to serve You in this, and now I'm too sick to complete it. How can You allow this to happen?" Instead he again changed his direction. Because he was too ill to work hard on the apology, he devoted his final years to ministering to the poor. He didn't go back to the world; he simply found a new way to carry out his desire to serve God.

During his life, Pascal argued against the theology of the Roman Catholic Jesuits and the Protestant Calvinists, so there are, no doubt, plenty of traditions that could find fault with him, but when I read his biography I am virtually moved to tears by the heart of this man who was so surrendered to God. He surrendered not only the temptations of the world—this I can understand—but also the glory of a particular service to God—and this is what humbles me. *Everything* was placed upon the altar, and there was no bitterness at all when God decided to keep it. Pascal just kept serving the Lord.

God, make me like that man!

Surrender doesn't come easy to me. As a third-born child, by disposition and perhaps by birth-order I've grown to be somewhat of a striver. Call me to sacrifice for Jesus, and I'll

quickly raise my hand. Tell me to take a risk for the Lord, and I'm willing. But ask me to surrender?

No thanks.

It has taken me some time to learn that the real test of true faith is not how successful we are, but how surrendered we are. The Christian faith is a faith in which we are called to die daily (Luke 9:23, among others). A Christian with his or her own agenda is like a horse with a head on both ends. There will be nothing but a "push-me/pull-you" struggle between this person and God. We die to our own will in order to follow God and His will.

The most Christian prayer we can ever pray is the prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemane—"Lord, Thy will, not mine, be done." So it should be no surprise that when Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He first blessed God, "Hallowed be Thy name," and then began with "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done."

Christian health is not defined by how happy we are, how prosperous or healthy we are, or even by how many people we have led to the Lord in the last year. Christian health is ultimately defined by how sincerely we wave our flag of surrender.

The questions leading to spiritual growth and health, then, are: What is God's will for me in this hour and day? Where is God leading me? How can I surrender to Him?

Law provided a clue: "He therefore is the devout man who lives no longer to his own will, or the way and spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God, who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety by doing everything in the name of God and under such rules as are conformable to His glory."²

We want to baptize our old nature rather than trade it in. We're not told to wash the old nature, however, but to kill it. True Christianity is a state in which we are utterly, absolutely, and completely surrendered to God.

THE TWO ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

My journey to surrender to God led me to two fundamental questions. The first question was: Is God good? Only if we truly believe in the goodness of God can we entrust ourselves so completely to His care.

The second question was: Is God Lord? That is, does God actually and truly rule over the affairs of His world?

Both the goodness and providence of God are well established in Scripture,³ but both are questioned today: "If God is so good, why does He allow evil things to happen?" and "If God is in control, why is the world such a mess?" Until we resolve these two questions in our own minds, we will find ourselves at virtual war with God.

I am not suggesting it is inappropriate to wrestle with the questions. They are fair questions, and we need to be honest about our inhibitions if we are ever to enter into a new intimacy with the Father. However, maturity will eventually require that we come to this conclusion: "Yes, God is good, and yes, God is Lord." Until we have done that, the intimacy of surrender simply will not be possible.

How can we ask ourselves to surrender to a God of whom we're suspicious? And even if we convince ourselves He's good, how can we surrender to Him if we think He's unaware, inactive, or powerless to make a difference?

The men and women who wrote the classics of Christian devotion believed in God's goodness and His lordship. Thomas à Kempis had this to say about the goodness of God—notice how this was the foundation for his call to surrender:

Do with me whatever it shall please thee. For it can not be anything but good, whatever thou shalt do with me. If it be thy will I should be in darkness, be thou blessed; and if it be thy will I should be in light, be thou again blessed. If thou grant me comfort, be thou blessed; and

if thou will have me afflicted, be thou still equally blessed. My son, such as this ought to be thy state, if thou desire to walk with Me. Thou must be as ready to suffer as to rejoice. Thou must cheerfully be as destitute and poor, as full and rich.⁴

William Law wrote this about God's providence:

Every man is to consider himself as a particular object of God's providence, under the same care and protection of God as if the world had been made for him alone. It is not by chance that any man is born at such a time, of such parents, and in such place and condition.... Every soul comes into the body at such a time and in such circumstances by the express designment of God, according to some purposes of His will and for some particular ends.⁵

We will find it impossible to move forward in surrender if we do not find ourselves agreeing with Thomas à Kempis regarding God's goodness and William Law regarding God's providence. Many of us carry wounds that need to be healed before we can embrace these two truths. Since surrender is fundamental to the Christian faith, we need to do the soul work that is necessary to arrive at an understanding of God's goodness and God's providence. Others of us may have some intellectual mountains to climb before we can wave our white flags of surrender. Whatever the case, we should do what we must do so we can resolve these two fundamental questions without delay.

The scrapper in each of us must be retired.

THE SURRENDERED HEART

Testimony to the surrendered heart is the hallmark of a Christian classic. It is not a coincidence that so many of the ancients have written about it. Consider just these examples:

Ignatius Loyola: "We do not for our part wish for health rather than sickness, for wealth rather than poverty, for honor rather than dishonor, for a long life rather than a short one; and so in all other things, desiring and choosing only those which most lead us to the end for which we were created."⁶

Thomas à Kempis: "Lord how often shall I resign myself, and wherein shall I forsake myself? Always, and every hour; as well in small things as in great. I except nothing, but do desire that thou be found divested in all things. Otherwise how canst thou be mine, and I thine, unless thou be stripped of all self-will, both within and without?"⁷

Teresa of Avila: "The whole aim of any person who is beginning prayer—and don't forget this, because it's very important—should be that he work and prepare himself with determination and every possible effort to bring his will into conformity with God's will.... It is the person who lives in more perfect conformity who will receive more from the Lord and be more advanced on this road."⁸

And my favorite, by John of the Cross: "I should like to persuade spiritual persons that the road leading to God does not entail a multiplicity of considerations, methods, manners, and experiences—though in their own way these may be a requirement for beginners—but demand only the one thing necessary: true self-denial, exterior and interior, through surrender of self both to suffering for Christ and to annihilation in all things.... If one fails in this exercise, the root and sum total of all the virtues, the other methods would amount to no more than going about in circles without any progress, even if they result in considerations and communications as lofty as those of the angels."⁹

I quote all of these saints in length to purposefully overwhelm you with the surrendered heart of those who have already walked the Christian journey. They went far in the Christian life because they surrendered to God and resolved to

cooperate with Him rather than fight and question Him throughout their entire lives.

There will likely be a time in our Christian journeys when, like Jacob, we will wrestle with God all night long. That night may last for months or even years. But there must eventually come a dawn when we say, "OK, God, You win. You've broken me and I'm Yours. No more fighting. No more complaining. Lead me where You will. Not my will but Thine be done."

The Biggest Block

The biggest block to our surrender is not our appetites and wayward desires, but our addiction to running our own lives. Surrender would be easy if it allowed us to merely sacrifice a few leaves, a few choice sins. But God wants more. God's ax hits the trunk.

Pascal, who knew the heartrending call of surrender, wrote, "True conversion consists in self-annihilation before the universal being whom we have so often vexed and who is perfectly entitled to destroy us at any moment, in recognizing that we can do nothing without him and that we have deserved nothing but his disfavor."¹⁰

The failure to truly die to ourselves is devastating to our spiritual health. Thomas à Kempis said, "the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world."¹¹ This is because without the resignation of self, we will be involved in petty turf wars every time God tries to break in. Do you ever find yourself bargaining with God? I do. "God, I'll do this if You'll do that." When I read Thomas à Kempis, however, I realized there can be no conditions to our true surrender. God is Lord of the universe—He is not a used-car salesman. Here are the words that challenged me:

Some there are who resign themselves, but with certain exceptions: for they put not their whole trust in God,

therefore, they study how to provide for themselves. Some also at first offer all, but afterward being assailed with temptation, they return again to their own place, and therefore they make no progress in the path of virtue. These shall not attain to the true liberty of a pure heart, nor to the grace of my sweetest familiarity, unless they first make an entire resignation and a daily sacrifice of themselves unto me. For without this, there neither is nor can be a fruitful union with me.¹²

An equally difficult lesson for me to learn was that surrender is never a once-in-a-lifetime activity; it is the continual worship of a growing Christian. This means that I must be willing to part with anything on a regular basis, even those good things that come from God. As part of our discipline of surrender, God will often ask us to let go of something very precious, even something He has given us. This is because, as Fénelon wrote, "There is not a single gift, noble as it may be, which, after having been a means of advancement, does not generally become, later on, a trap and an obstacle, by the return of self which soils the soul. For this reason God takes away what he has given. But he does not take it away to deprive us of it forever. He takes it away so that he can better give it, so that he can give it back without the impurity of this evil sense of ownership which we mingle with it without noticing it in ourselves. The loss of the gift takes away our ownership.... Then the gift is no longer the gift of God. It is God himself in the soul. It is no more a gift of God, because we consider it no longer as something apart from him, and something which the soul can possess."¹³

Just months before my wife and I became engaged, Lisa was in Mexico on a short-term missions trip. She sent me a letter explaining that she was considering staying in Mexico for another year. A close friend, sensing my anxiety over Lisa's plans, wrote me a letter after he had spent some time praying

for us. Rob said I had to hold Lisa like I held sand—with an open palm. If I closed my fist too tightly, the sand would run through my fingers.

I knew Rob had heard God correctly, but his words were the last words I wanted to hear. As I said before, surrender has never been easy for me; but this time, I let go. Lisa ended up coming back, and we were engaged just a couple of months later.

How many Christians have wondered why a precious relationship has seemed to go sour, a powerful ministry appears to be drying up, or a healthy business seems to be disintegrating? Could it be that we have taken what is good and begun worshipping the created rather than the Creator? It would be simplistic to suggest this is always the case but presumptuous to assume it is never the case. God blesses us, and we become so enamored with the blessing that we lose sight of the One who blesses.

Surrender is thus the daily worship of a true Christian—and not just in the big things either. If we gladly relinquish the "small little sacrifices," our growth will be great, for any small surrender is a great victory; any refusal of surrender is a great defeat.

We need to understand the seriousness of rebellion. When we refuse God in the big things, He will move to the small. When we refuse to give God even these, what else can He ask? We have then approached the land of apostasy, and all the spiritual disciplines in the world, all the beautiful songs we sing, and all the money we give away won't excuse the fact that our hearts are in rebellion. One of the surest symptoms of rebellion and a lack of submission to God's will is in the act of complaining.

Christian surrender means the death of complaining.

THE DEATH OF COMPLAINING

When my son was just three years old, he fell on a fireplace mantel and cut himself just above his left eye. I rushed him to the hospital and stayed with him as the nurses put him in a stretcher

designed to keep his arms pinned to his side. As the doctor began putting stitches in Graham's head, I held his hand and almost lost my composure when Graham whimpered, "Please Daddy, he's hurting me. Make him stop. Please, Daddy, please."

It broke my heart; I could barely stand up. Graham saw me as his protector, and he wanted to know why I wasn't protecting him.

I *was* protecting him, of course, only this time, I was protecting him from himself. In the long run, he needed the stitches. I had to let him go through the pain.

Now, imagine if another man was on the other side of Graham during the stitches, whispering in his ear, "See, Graham, your dad doesn't really love you; otherwise, he wouldn't make you go through all this pain. If you were my son—if you followed me—I wouldn't make you go through this."

That's a true spiritual picture of what often happens when we go through difficulties. God knows what is best for us, but our spiritual adversary often tempts us with thoughts that if God *really* loved us, He would spare us the ordeal.

This is shortsighted thinking, and it can be crippling, spiritually, if we pay heed to that lie.

Sometimes, I have to remind myself on virtually a daily basis: "*God knows best.*" And when I accept the fact that God knows best, there is no room for complaining in my life. William Law pointed out that "resignation to the divine will signifies a cheerful approbation and thankful acceptance of everything that comes from God. It is not enough patiently to submit, but we must thankfully receive and fully approve of everything that by the order of God's providence happens to us...."

"It is very common for people to allow themselves great liberty in finding fault with such things as have only God for their cause.... It sounds indeed much better to murmur at the course of the world or the state of things than to murmur at providence,

to complain of the seasons and weather, than to complain of God, but if these have no other cause but God and His providence it is a poor distinction to say that you are only angry at the things but not at the cause and director of them."¹⁴

It will be hard for many of us to admit we are complaining about God, but honesty is essential if we are to be delivered from this sin. We can't gripe about every decision a coach or a politician makes and then pretend we support him or her. At a particularly frustrating time in my life, when it felt as if God had kept me in a hole for eight long years, I found myself going through the motions of worship but continually asking, "God, why are You doing this to me?" The problem with this is that we can't worship someone we don't trust. I couldn't learn my lesson until I was broken enough to surrender, for my questioning came very close to crossing the line separating honest pain from prideful blasphemy.

I learned that faith isn't tested by how often God answers my prayers with a yes, but by my willingness to continue serving Him and *thanking* Him, even when I don't have a clue as to what He is doing. This required a radical shift in my thinking; I had to become convinced of God's oversight in my life.

When we complain, what we are really saying is, "I could have done a better job than God in this instance. If I had made the choice, I would have done this and so..." This is blasphemy.

When I looked back on the difficulty of those eight long years, I saw their necessity in a new light.

Had you been anything else than what you are, you had, all things considered, been less wisely provided for than you are now; you had wanted some circumstances and conditions that are best fitted to make you happy yourself and serviceable to the glory of God.

Could you see all that which God sees, all that happy chain of causes and motives which are to move

and invite you to a right course of life, you would see something to make you like that state you are in as fitter for you than any other.

But as you cannot see this, so it is here that your Christian faith and trust in God is to exercise itself and render you as grateful and thankful for the happiness of your state as if you saw everything that contributes to it with your own eyes.¹⁵

So there was no more room for me to complain. I found that the most potent weapon against complaining or even questioning is the gift of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving became my doorway to a more mature surrender.

THANKSGIVING: THE DOORWAY TO SURRENDER

When I began to fight my sin of complaining with thanksgiving, the opposing virtue, this was a struggle for me. But God in His mercy placed gratitude in my heart, and like a snowball rolling down a hill, that gift of gratitude grew until the complaining was wiped out.

I then reached a crossroad where I was able to thank God even for the eight-year desert. I saw that I had so much inner sin in me then that there was no other way for me to be healed. If God had answered my prayers for an earlier reprieve, He wouldn't have been acting out of love; He would have left me in immaturity, and I would have continued to make a mess out of my life. Law wrote.

For if [a Christian] cannot thank and praise God as well in calamities and sufferings as in prosperity and happiness, he is as far from the piety of a Christian as he that only loves them that love him is from the charity of a Christian. For to thank God only for such

things as you like is no more a proper act of piety than to believe only what you see is an act of faith.

Resignation and thanksgiving to God are only acts of piety when they are acts of faith, trust, and confidence in the divine goodness.¹⁶

My only hope of salvation was if God could pull me away from the steering wheel of my life. The difficult period I endured was God's way of doing that, and as I realized the effectiveness of it I became thankful for it. This is when I learned that thanksgiving is a discipline, and like all the disciplines, it requires practice.

Law taught me to begin by practicing thanksgiving in the small things.

Don't...please yourself with thinking how piously you would act and submit to God in a plague, a famine, or persecution, but be intent upon the perfection of the present day, and be assured that the best way of showing a true zeal is to make little things the occasions of great piety.

Begin, therefore, in the smallest matters and most ordinary occasions, and accustom your mind to the daily exercise of this pious temper in the lowest occurrences of life. And when a contempt, an affront, a little injury, loss, or disappointment, or the smallest events of every day continually raise your mind to God in proper acts of resignation, then you may justly hope that you shall be numbered amongst those that are resigned and thankful to God in the greatest trials and afflictions.¹⁷

Prayers of thanksgiving can be mixed with prayers of surrender for even greater effect. Thomas à Kempis provided us

with a great model: "My son, say thou thus in everything: 'Lord, if this be pleasing unto thee, let it be so. Lord, if it be to thy honor, in thy name let this be done. Lord, if thou seest it good, and allowest it to be profitable for me, then grant unto me that I may use this to thine honor. But if thou knowest it will be harmful unto me, and no profit to the health of my soul, take away any such desire from me.'" ¹⁸

CONFORMED TO HIS IMAGE

If our hearts are going to truly surrender to God, we must be willing to allow God to define good and evil and shape us according to His will. We must be willing, not only to do what is right, but to let God define what is right. Good is whatever God desires; evil is whatever God prohibits.

At first, conforming may simply be an act of the will. We may obey God, not necessarily because we want to, but because we know we should. However, if we are faithful in surrendering our will to God, over time we will soon begin wanting to obey. Law said, "When you love that which God loves, you act with Him, you join yourself to Him, and when you love what He dislikes, then you oppose Him and separate yourself from Him." ¹⁹

This is why it is so spiritually debilitating to ever willfully rebel against God. Obedience and disobedience are both habitual. Our appetites and passions are like our tastebuds—we crave what we grow used to. To experience true surrender, we must die to our own desires so God can give us new desires.

When God birthed thanksgiving in my heart, my purest cry was simply, "God I want to be on Your side." My only request was to be wherever God was. If God was in riches or poverty, sickness or health, at home or far away, I wanted to be there. Whatever God was doing, that's what I wanted to be doing. Nothing else mattered.

THE JOY AND PEACE OF SURRENDER

At its root, however, surrender becomes not so much a discipline as a cry of the heart. It is a joy, and it brings great peace. Fénelon wrote, "O bridegroom of souls, thou lettest the souls which do not resist thee experience in this life an advance taste of that felicity." ²⁰

This "taste of felicity," however, is dependent upon true surrender. Fénelon told us our hearts, not just our wills, must be changed. "If we are...faithful in breaking internally with creatures, that is, stopping them from entering the depths of our hearts, which our Lord has kept to dwell in and to be respected, worshipped and loved in, we shall soon taste the pure joy which God will not fail to give to a soul which is free and detached from all human affection." ²¹

The glory of the Christian life is found in the fact that God doesn't ask us to surrender to just difficult things. At first it may seem like that, but eventually, if we don't hold back, we'll find that God's will is for us to surrender to many very wonderful things. Again, it all comes back to trusting in His goodness. When we surrender to a good God, we shouldn't be surprised that we must surrender to good things. Sin tastes sweet but turns bitter in our stomachs. Holiness often tastes bitter initially but later turns sweet. It's like a fine wine which seasons over time.

One of the joys of surrender is a deep peace. Rebellion means war, so it is no surprise that surrender means peace. This peace gives us a new freedom in our relationships. As always, true Christian spirituality has implications for community living in families and churches. Thomas à Kempis said if we are not surrendered to God, we will be at war with others. "He that is well in peace, is not suspicious of any man. But he that is discontented and troubled, is tossed with divers suspicions: he is neither at rest himself nor suffereth others to be at rest....He

considereth what others are bound to do, and neglecteth that which is bound to himself.”²²

I suspect that a thousand years from now I’ll have a pretty good understanding of why my life has gone the way it has; for now, I’m content to trust that God knows what He is doing.

Our model in this is Christ, à Kempis wrote. He imagined Christ saying, “Of My own will did I offer up Myself unto God the Father for thy sins, My hands being stretched forth on the cross, and My body laid bare, so that nothing remained in Me that was not wholly turned into a sacrifice for the appeasing of the divine Majesty. In like manner oughtest thou also to offer thyself willingly unto Me every day...with all thy strength and affections, and to the utmost stretch of thine inward faculties. What do I require of thee more, than that thou study to resign thyself entirely unto Me?”²³

God will not lay down His arms. He has declared war on all who stand in rebellion. The vanquished receive eternal life; the obstinate are condemned by their own foolishness. But there will be no peace until we surrender. Surrender to God is the essence—and the greatest blessing—of the Christian life.

REFLECTIONS

Copy the following prayer, written by Francis de Sales:

And, turning myself towards my most gracious and merciful God, I desire, purpose, and am irrevocably resolved to serve and love him now and forever; and to this end, I give and consecrate to him my soul with all its powers, my heart with all its affections, and my body with all its sense, protesting that I will never more abuse any part of my being against his divine will and sovereign majesty, to whom I offer up and sacrifice myself in spirit, to be forever his loyal, obedient, and faithful creature, without ever revoking or repenting of this my act and deed.

But if, alas! I should chance, through the suggestion of the enemy, or through human frailty, to transgress in any point, or fail in adhering to this my resolution and dedication, I protest from this moment and am determined, with the assistance of the Holy Ghost, to rise as soon as I shall perceive my fall, and return again to the divine mercy, without any delay whatsoever. This is my inviolable and irrevocable will, intention, and resolution, which I declare and confirm without reservation or exception, in the sacred presence of God.²⁴

If you can, in good conscience, sign the paper on which you’ve copied this prayer, claiming it as the prayer of your heart, do so and mark the date. Then carry this prayer with you. When God’s Spirit prompts your heart to surrender and you feel yourself resisting, take the prayer out of your purse or wallet and read it, reminding yourself of the pledge you have made by the grace of God.