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Holy Available

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Part 1

SPLASHES OF GLORY

The grand point is not to wear the garb, nor use the brogue of religion, but to possess the life of God within, and feel and think as Jesus would have done because of that inner life. Small is the value of external religion unless it is the outcome of a life within.

Charles Spurgeon

Lord Jesus Christ, I know I am a sinner and unworthy, for today the ornaments of a harlot have shone more brightly than the ornaments of my soul.

Bishop Nonnus

God wants you to be holy.

Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 NLT

Chapter 1



KISSING THE LEPER

Christianity is not merely a philosophical theory or a moral code, but involves a direct sharing in divine life and glory, a transforming union with God “face to face.”

Kallistos Ware

*The LORD will restore the splendor of Jacob
like the splendor of Israel,
though destroyers have laid them waste
and have ruined their vines.*

Nahum 2:2

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.

Paul, in 2 Timothy 4:7–8

Shortly after the young Francis of Assisi embraced a faith that would help color the face of Christianity for centuries to come, he sensed God telling him, “Francis, all those things that you have loved in the flesh you must now despise, and from those things that you formerly loathed you will drink great sweetness and immeasurable delight.”

If a believer heard such words today, he or she would likely write them down in a journal and then forget them. Or perhaps the new Christian might compose a poem or a song, celebrating the sentiment. If the person were an author, he or she might even find a publisher and entomb the lofty notions inside a book.

But not Francis.

Almost immediately, he *applied* the divine admonition in a horrifically beautiful way.

As the young Christian rode his horse out of town, he saw what he once most despised — a leper. It is difficult for most moderns to understand the terror of that once untreatable disease. Leprosy is an insidious malady in which bacteria seek refuge in the nerves and then proceed to destroy them, one by one. Since the bacteria prefer the cooler parts of the body, toes, fingers, eyes, earlobes, and noses are most vulnerable. When your nerves lose all sensitivity, you become your own worst enemy, not realizing the damage you're causing to your own body. You could literally rub your eyes blind.

Eventually, you lose your ability to see, and then you lose your ability to feel, and suddenly, you're living in a senseless world. The only way to know what you're holding in your hands is to find any remaining, stubbornly sensitive part of your body — perhaps a quarter-inch stretch of your lips or an eighth-inch spot on your cheek — and try to guess from the texture and the weight what it is you're carrying.

Even apart from the macabre appearance of a leprosy victim, no one wants to end up alienated from the world, so most people kept an understandably wide berth around lepers. It was one of the most feared diseases of its time. “During my life of sin,” Francis wrote, “nothing disgusted me like seeing victims of leprosy.”¹

Exuberant in his newfound faith and with joy flooding his soul — and remembering he was now to love and even treasure those things he formerly loathed — Francis chose not to run from the leper, as he would have done earlier in his life. Instead, he leaped from his horse, knelt in front of the leper, and proceeded to kiss the diseased white hand.

He *kissed* it.

Francis then further astonished the leper by giving him money. But even that wasn't enough. No, Francis was determined to “drink great sweetness” from what he formerly loathed, so he jumped back on his horse and rode to a neighboring leper colony. Francis “begged their pardon for having so often despised them” and, after giving them money, refused to leave until he had kissed each one of them, joyfully receiving the touch of their pale, encrusted lips. Only then did Francis jump back on his horse to go on his way.

In that indelible moment, Francis's faith became incarnate. His belief didn't just inspire him; it transformed him.

Francis's initial conversion was invisible, exhibited only in the changed expression on his face. That's as far as many of us ever go — a superficial change of mind in response to a compelling argument for faith. *This* act was astonishingly explicit — a grotesquely gorgeous parable of a radically changed man. The very instant Francis's lips touched the leper, what could have been merely a religion crumbled under the weight of a new way of life. The horse no longer carried a man; that beast transported a saint, whose example continues to challenge us yet today.

Perpetua's Passion

Nobly born, wealthy, well married, and a young mother, Vibia Perpetua typified the ideal of a successful North African woman at the dawn of the third century. But her Christian faith soon turned her idyllic existence into a battleground of alienation when Emperor Septimus Severus announced a decree forbidding conversion to Christianity — and requiring all citizens to offer sacrifices to him, as if he were a god. Those who refused would be thrown to the beasts at the amphitheater for entertainment.

Perpetua's father, beside himself, tried vainly to convince his daughter not to "throw her life away." He pleaded with her not to bring shame onto his own head, nor to abandon her child, still nursing at the breast. Was it really such a big deal, he asked, to make such a small ceremonial sacrifice?

Perpetua pointed to a ceramic pitcher. "Father, do you see this pitcher?"

"Yes, of course I see it."

"Can it be called by any name other than what it is?"

"No."

"So I also cannot be called anything else than what I am, which is a Christian."²

In her diary, Perpetua tells us, "Enraged by my words, my father came at me as though to tear out my eyes."

She escaped violence — that time. But on March 7, AD 203, Perpetua, accompanied by her servant Felicity, entered the amphitheater to face a gruesome death. The young women were stripped naked, but even this bloodthirsty crowd could not bear such a sight. A medieval sourcebook describes the crowd's horrified reaction: "The people shuddered, seeing one a tender girl, the other her breasts yet dropping from her late childbearing. So they were called back and clothed in loose robes."³

Seeking ultimate humiliation, the young women's executioners chose a bull. Unlike a bear, who could kill his prey with one swipe of his paw, a bull's killing took time — death by a dozen gores, so to speak. After yet another mauling that left the young women torn but not dead, the crowd appealed to the emperor: "Enough!"

The order was given, and a gladiator came out. He was supposed to behead the women, but as he walked up to Perpetua, the hardened killer's hands started to tremble. Perhaps it was something in Perpetua's face, something about her eyes — who knows? — but the distracted gladiator's first blow once again injured but did not kill the young twenty-two-year-old.

Now people became sick to their stomachs. Finally, Perpetua showed all of them mercy by clutching the gladiator's hand and guiding his killing blow to her neck.

Generations of believers have seized inspiration from the passionate, strong, and heroic faith of a young woman just past adolescence, who boldly proclaimed to her enraged father, "I cannot be called anything else than what I am, which is a Christian," and who willingly faced a horrific death rather than deny her Lord. In fact, her story so energized the early church that warnings often went out not to treat her diary like Scripture. No less a light than Saint Augustine preached several sermons in Perpetua's honor on March 7, the anniversary of her death.

A Wrecked Word

Witnessing the dynamic witness of a young Francis or Perpetua, I feel embarrassed at how small-minded we can be when discussing

the Christian faith with young people today. The apostle Paul exalted life in Christ as the most exciting and compelling life anyone could choose. In a marvelous take on 2 Timothy 4:7 (MSG), Eugene Peterson recounts Paul telling Timothy, “This is the only race worth running.”

Today’s believers often lose touch with this sense of the glory of being a Christian. We settle for so little — a tame religion, a few rituals, maybe even an occasional miraculous answer to prayer — and so pass our lives without understanding our true identity in Christ, embracing our calling as God’s children, or fulfilling our divine purpose.

Is the Christianity taught today large enough to seize our hearts? Does its promise of transformation so compel us that we would give all we have to take hold of it?

Most of us have heard the modern translation of 2 Timothy 4:7 that says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” An Orthodox monk has pointed out that this is a “strikingly Greek” expression that may best be understood as “I have fought the Beautiful Fight.”⁴ What a mesmerizing twist of a phrase! We can easily think of what is beautiful, and our minds can quickly grasp what constitutes a fight.

But putting the two together? A *beautiful* fight?

Here’s the brilliance of it all: in the Christian life of real transformation and sacrificial service, there is drama, passion, struggle, and vision — everything our souls need to feel alive. And yet compare this exaltation of the Christian life with how it often gets presented today. Far too frequently, Christianity becomes a list of prohibitions. I’ll never forget talking to one young woman, who said, “Why would I ever want to become a Christian? All they want me to do is dump all the good music from my iPod and wear ugly clothes.” Her words tell me that, at least in our preaching, if not in our minds, we have lost our vision for the glorious, transforming presence of Jesus Christ — how he really makes a difference. This transformation goes well beyond a few instances of slightly modified behavior.

Sadly, *holiness* is practically a wrecked word outside the church. As I write these lines, yet another nationally known pastor has seen

his scandalous conduct exposed, confirming the suspicions of so many who think that Christians are pitiful creatures of self-hatred who secretly crave what we most vigorously speak against.

Frankly, I don't fault the world for celebrating our hypocrisy. I fault us for defining the faith by what we're *not* supposed to do, setting ourselves up for constant humiliation. If that's what they know us for, if that's what they hear us saying, then we have neither lived nor preached in a way that showcases God's glory.

Let me ask you — what do you most think about when someone mentions the word *holiness*? Does it refer to the words you use or don't use, where you go or don't go on the Internet, how you express or don't express your sexuality? What is a *holy* person? And then ask yourself, can a few prohibitions like this adequately describe the powerful presence of a Francis or a Perpetua?

Without this sense of a powerfully *transforming* faith, we get stuck on lesser battles and smaller aims. We do this primarily by reducing our faith to a set of intellectual beliefs and a list of forbidden practices. Now, doctrine is enormously important, as is morality. But doctrine alone isn't enough. ("Even the demons believe [the doctrine that there is one God] — and shudder" [James 2:19].) And my problem with those who put so much emphasis on moralism is not that they go too far but that they don't go nearly far enough. They mistake the means for the end. Neither Francis nor Perpetua would be likely, in today's world, to spend their time getting drunk, cussing out inconsiderate drivers, or frittering away their time on salacious Internet searches. But you could never define them by these restraints. On the contrary, in their day they became known for what they *were*, not for what they *weren't*.

Here's the challenge of a small-minded faith based only on prohibitions: we still sin. If a successful Christian is defined by what she or he doesn't do, we're all in trouble, because the Bible tells us that "we all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). Preaching mere moralism is the surest way to tire people out, because in one sense we're all going to fall short of the ideal, and in another sense, spending our lives trying *not* to do something is far less than we were created for. If our goal in life is primarily to avoid something, then at best

we'll achieve nothing. Such a faith will never capture our hearts. If a young woman won't even empty her iPod for that faith, why would she ever give up her life for it?

Incarnational spirituality — the living, reigning, and ascended Jesus living through us and transforming us into different people — does not exist to uphold a few rules but rather speaks of a process that creates an entirely new person who sees with new eyes, feels with a new heart, hears with renewed ears, and lives with a new passion. It is, I believe, the only life worth living.

By the time you've completed this book, I pray that you will view your eyes as God's servants. You will look at your hands and feet as holy instruments of the mighty Creator. You will offer your ears to be constantly in tune with God's instruction. Your heart will beat with God's passion, and your mind will begin the journey of thinking God's thoughts. Your body will be a living, breathing center of purposeful passion, pointing toward the risen and reigning Christ, who works so powerfully within us. You will become "holy available" to him.

You've probably heard many sermons and read many books on what you *shouldn't* be and *shouldn't* do. This book seeks to paint a portrait of what you can become. Our creator God is eager to splash his glory on us. The apostle Peter promises us that "[God's] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness" so that we "may participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:3, 4).

God didn't create you *not to do something*; if that had been his goal, he never would have formed you, because if you never existed, you never would have sinned. God made each of us in his image, and he wants us to recapture that image, to surrender to his work in our lives, so that we "will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor" (Isaiah 61:3).

I pray that we will settle for nothing less than the return of this splendor. *Holy Available* explores how faith in Jesus Christ can be radically different from and better than what we are currently experiencing. Christianity as a spiritual journey is not simply defined by what we believe or how we behave but is marked profoundly by *who we are*. It is a different type of transformation — a transformation of

being, not just allegiance; a transformation of experience, not just confession; a transformation of existence, not just adherence. It is a return to splendor — for the glory of God.

Return to Splendor

How can we recapture this splendor today?

Holy Available invites us to explore the depths of a truly transforming faith, an incarnational spirituality that doesn't dwell merely on a list of prohibitions and forbidden sins but powerfully ushers us into something so precious, so profound, and so stirring that we would gladly give up all we have just to lay hold of it. It is what in our deepest longings we truly want to become.

We want to be like Jesus.

This calling does include a renewed morality, but it goes much deeper. It involves how we see the world, the way we hear God and others, the passions we feel, how we use our hands and feet, the thoughts we think. This is a complete transformation of all of our members — and as we are transformed, we will become holy available to God.

≡≡≡ LOOKING BACK ≡≡≡

- We need a more compelling understanding of the Christian life, one that more closely measures up to that described by the apostle Paul, who calls Christianity “the only race worth running.”
- “Mere moralists” mistake the means for the end; they have reduced Christianity to a list of prohibitions. “Incarnational spirituality” is a more biblical picture, much broader in its scope, which focuses on what we are to *become*.
- We are invited to become people who are strong “oaks of righteousness” and who reveal God's splendor.