

## **“Ascetics: Loving God in Solitude and Simplicity”**

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

Sixth in a Series *Loving God Many Ways*

Psalm 62

March 22, 2015

For God alone my soul waits in silence.  
From him comes my salvation.  
He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress.  
I shall never be shaken.

How long will you assault a person?  
Would all of you batter your victim,  
as you would a leaning wall or a tottering fence?  
Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.  
They delight in lies.  
They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse.

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.  
He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress.  
I shall not be shaken.  
On God rests my deliverance and my honor.  
God is my mighty rock and my refuge.  
Trust in him at all times, O people.  
Pour out your heart before him, for God is a refuge for us.

Those of low birth are but a breath.  
Those of high birth are a delusion.  
Both, if weighed on a balance, are nothing.  
Together they are lighter than a breath.  
Put no confidence in extortion, and set no empty hopes on robbery.  
If riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this:  
that power belongs to God,  
and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.  
For you repay to all according to their work.

Psalm 62

New Revised Standard Version (alt)

Syncretica was in love. She had wealth, education, status and physical beauty. She gave it all up for her love. She made her home among the tombs, outside of the city. (It was the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and the city was Alexandria, Egypt). Syncretica lived a life of prayer and

hardship. She was drawn to a greater connection, a greater wealth, a greater wisdom, and a greater beauty. Mother Syncletica loved God. Was she crazy?<sup>1</sup>

Francis was in love. He was rich, and a soldier. Yet he was drawn to a greater battle. He renounced his wealth and took to a life of begging. He walked from place to place, and encouraged others to faith and new life. Many joined Francis. He lived a life of prayer, giving, reform and evangelism. Saint Francis loved God. Was he crazy?<sup>2</sup>

We've been celebrating ways of loving God, taking a different one each month. I've put them in your Sunday News.<sup>3</sup> God draws each of us more to some pathways, and less to others. (At the back of the sanctuary is a short questionnaire that can help you clarify your pathways.) Today, our focus is the fifth pathway, **ascetics**. Ascetics love God in solitude and simplicity.

## II

Syncletica of Alexandria and Francis of Assisi were ascetics. They are admired. But were they just a bit crazy? Loving God is good, of course. But was their love over-the-top?

Are you an ascetic? Even if you seem normal? Do you feel closest to God when you are alone? Do you value silence in worship? Have you gone on a retreat? Would you enjoy one? Do you keep things simple? Are hard times when you deepen most in your relationship with God? You might be an ascetic.

Jesus went off by himself to pray, especially those forty days in the desert, fasting and wrestling. Our Master said we should pray alone. He assumed we would fast.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert\\_Mothers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_Mothers) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncletica\\_of\\_Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncletica_of_Alexandria)

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_of\\_Assisi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_of_Assisi)

<sup>3</sup> Gary Thomas, Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). Here are short definitions of each.

**Caregivers** love God by caring for others.

**Traditionalists** love God with our ancestors.

**Activists** love God by confronting injustice.

**Contemplatives** love God through adoration.

**Ascetics** love God in solitude and simplicity.

**Enthusiasts** love God by engaging mystery and celebration.

**Intellectuals** love God with their minds.

**Naturalists** love God outdoors.

**Sensates** love God by engaging their senses.

I've changed the order Thomas presents them, to fit my planned order for this series.

<sup>4</sup> For Jesus praying alone, see Mark 1.35, Matthew 14.13 and 14.22-23. Jesus' extended wilderness retreat is recounted in Mark 1.13 and told in more detail in Matthew 4.1-11 and Luke 4.1-13. His teachings on

We heard Psalm 62. It is attributed to King David; he was *not* an ascetic. Still, it speaks to the ascetic spirit. It praises silence and being alone with God. It battles with foes; for ascetics these can be spiritual and fierce. It rejects luxury. Most of all, it intensely focuses its trust on God.

### III

Here are three words for ascetics: alone, harsh, and lack.

#### **Alone.**

Ascetics value solitude. Solitude is not the same as loneliness. Nor is it antisocial. Ascetics have less companionship with people, to enjoy more companionship with God.

You don't need to run off to the desert. Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles who founded our Methodist tradition, had nineteen children (though nine died in infancy). Her house was busy! She could not get away! So when she needed to be alone with God, she would cover her head with her apron. The kids knew to be quiet.<sup>5</sup> So, how can you create a sense of apart-ness from others and for God in your life?

Gary Thomas says *"it's in those solitary moments that colours regain their brightness, truth regains its clarity, and reality loses its fog. Without some time alone I feel like I've lost my anchor."*<sup>6</sup>

#### **Harsh**

Ascetics give up comfort. Many of the early ascetics, like Mother Synclitica, went to the desert. Not because it was quiet. For ascetics, the desert was busy and full of action. It gave no place to hide, so you had to face yourself and your temptations.<sup>7</sup> It was a battleground for wrestling with one's demons, maybe the Devil. (Jesus' time in the wilderness fits this perfectly.) Blazing in the day, freezing in the night, and always dry, it was harsh.

Any sand on my boots is left from winter, not the desert. How can we live ascetically? Well, do you experience hardships? When hardships come, ascetics lean into and embrace them. They see it like athletic training. The hardship of exercise builds strength for later competition; the hardships of life strengthen the soul for struggles to come.

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prayer are in Matthew 6.5-6. In Matthew 6.16ff he cautions against fasting to gain public approval, but his assumption is nonetheless that his followers will fast.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>7</sup> See "The Desert" section at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert\\_Mothers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_Mothers).

## Lack

Ascetics have simple clothing, often worn. Their food is spartan, and they fast. It's not that good food and clothing are bad. Ascetics realize that "the finer things" take effort. They devote their efforts instead to a luxurious pursuit of God.<sup>8</sup>

Does God demand it? No! Does a spouse demand to be treated to dinner? Or jewellery? Or gifts? If they do demand, they might get them. But gifts are best when not demanded. When he was writing about ascetics, G. K. Chesterton said, "*It was because the thing [the sacrifice] was not demanded that it was done.*" Ascetics' simplicity is their un-demanded gift to God.<sup>9</sup>

Are ascetics gloomy? Again, listen to Chesterton:

*. . . Francis of Assisi certainly was ascetical and certainly was not gloomy. He devoured fasting as a man devours food. He plunged freely after poverty as men have dug madly for gold. And it is precisely the positive and passionate quality of this part of his personality that is a challenge to the modern mind in the whole problem of the pursuit of pleasure.*<sup>10</sup>

Ascetics challenge us. They make us think hard about what life is all about. This spiritual pathway is counter-cultural.<sup>11</sup> We are mad about keeping connected; ascetics value solitude. We strive for comfort and ease; ascetics treasure austerity. Our culture trains us to want more; ascetics love the less.

## IV

I've known Jenn since she was young. She came to our youth group, we're friends with her family, and I've been blessed to watch Jenn grow in her knowledge, trust and commitment to Jesus.

Almost two years ago, Jenn married Nathan. They've been writing about courtship, engagement and now marriage, and what they are learning about following Jesus. Her latest reflection is about Lent.<sup>12</sup> I don't know if Jenn is an ascetic, but her words are wise.

*[How] do we prepare our hearts to love and to be loved by Christ? I think it's a lot like*

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<sup>8</sup> "Ascetics are 'strict' only because they want to reserve a major portion of their lives for their passionate pursuit of God." Thomas, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas, 108.

<sup>12</sup> [www.sacramentallove.com/2015/02/15/lent-the-pangs-of-love](http://www.sacramentallove.com/2015/02/15/lent-the-pangs-of-love)

*loving anyone else. Its not so much what you do, but the love that it is done with.*

*Take Nathan and I for example. My heart is not so shallow that it melts at the sight of an emptied garbage can or a clean bathroom. When Nathan does some act of service for me, it's not the clean house that captures my heart; it's the spirit of sacrifice in which it was done. He is willing to suffer and sacrifice for me. In some little way, and bigger ones too, he puts me first before his own desires. He makes room in his life to love me. It's an expression of love for his bride, not just garbage duty. . . .*

*[How] can I love Christ heroically? What can I possibly give him that he doesn't already have? Friends; Christ is not in any need for chocolate, coffee, or cigarettes. Giving up Facebook or Netflix doesn't add anything to the ambiance of heaven. What Christ really desires from us is our hearts. . . .*

All the pathways are about loving God. Ascetics value being less with others, so they can be with God more. Ascetics embrace less comfort, so they can embrace God more. Ascetics live with less abundance, so they can give love abundantly to God.

More from Jenn:

*When we deny ourselves the pleasures or conveniences of this world, we ignite in ourselves desire. That physical longing, or hunger draws us into understanding the longing and desire that God has for us. We can physically feel the love and longing Christ has for us. It reminds us how fragile we are, how finite, how human, and that our fulfillment of desires does not lie in this world. It brings our attention to what we were made for, and the only one who can fulfill us.*