

Spiritual Classics of the Soul

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Many centuries ago a wise man declared that "of making of books there is no end" (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Among the vast number of books, however, relatively few have had a widespread influence from generation to generation. In the area of spiritual discipline there are a few classics whose acknowledged excellence have stood the test of the centuries and until our day have been a perennial source of inspiration to multitudes of people. Unquestionably their excellence is derived from the fact that they deal with the highest concern of man--the intimate dealings of God with the human soul. These spiritual classics of the soul have directed questing men and women to the very heart of things, and have been a priceless boon in their search for the highest.

Foremost of all, of course, is the Bible which is justly called "the Book of books." It is impossible to exaggerate the Bible's influence upon the lives of men. Through many generations and across numerous lands, its message has brought light and hope, inspiration and challenge, rebuke and correction, and above all, a Saviour and salvation, to vast multitudes. It has given spiritual sustenance to Christian believers, who like Job (23:12) have esteemed God's word more than their necessary food, and have shared the testimony of Jeremiah (12:16): "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart." Unfortunately, American "activism" and regular times of meditation and devotion with the Word of God do not readily blend. But for those who conscientiously give the Bible top priority, and who regularly and methodically read and study it, there is a perennial source of grace and power that keeps the soul in a satisfying communion with God.

Though the Bible stands by itself in its power to bless and instruct men spiritually, other spiritual classics have proven themselves as sources that bring spiritual enlightenment and understanding to the mind, as well as fires of yearning and aspiration to the soul. Undoubtedly the foremost among them is The Confessions of Saint Augustine. It is unquestionably one of the greatest of human writings, and certainly one of the most influential. Luther regarded the Bible and the Confessions above all other books. Two main emphases stand out in this

classic: *God the Seeker, and Man the Sinner*. At the very beginning is what might be considered the golden-text of the Confessions that is known to many who are unacquainted with anything else Augustine has written: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." In the soul's deep quest God was Seeker in the thought of Augustine, and to this fact he makes repeated reference. His meeting with Ambrose which led to his conversion is evidence of God's initiative. "All unknowing I was brought by God to him, that knowing I should be brought by him to God" (V, 13). Again he writes: "Thou didst seek us when we sought not Thee, didst seek us indeed that we might seek Thee" (XI, 2). Man is the rebellious one who resists the seeking love of God. It was so with Augustine. A deep sense of sin and unworthiness permeates the Confessions, a fact inseparable from Augustine's earlier profligacy and licentiousness, the utter domination of the flesh. But God's grace and love overcame his rebellion, and Augustine became numbered among twice-born men. Often he breaks into exclamations of wonder, praise and gratitude in view of God's mercy and goodness. In spite of passages that are difficult to understand, the Confessions have enabled multitudes of ordinary men and women, employing the words of Augustine, to pour out their own hearts in prayer and praise, contrition and confession, thanksgiving and adoration. In laying bare his own soul before God, he has enabled others to better understand themselves as well as the ways of God with man, and at the same time provided challenge and encouragement to seek deeper levels of spiritual life and experience.

One of the most widely read of the devotional classics is Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. It was written in the fourteenth century by a religious recluse, and since then passed through more than three thousand editions. In the judgment of many critics it ranks next to the Bible as devotional literature. Though written primarily for men and women who wished to live apart from the world, either in semi-retirement or in the cloister, yet millions of lay people have been gripped by its appeal, whether rich or poor, learned or unlearned, Protestant or Catholic, evangelical or skeptic. "Man's real progress is in self-denial" is the keynote of the book, and from its pages there is sounded a clarion call to self-conquest, self-discipline, and a complete submission to the will of God. Even Matthew Arnold regarded *The Imitation of Christ* as "the most exquisite document after those of the New Testament of all that the Christian spirit has ever inspired." It is written in great

simplicity, and yet with a power to lift men above the world of things with its troubles, evils, pains and sorrows, and to bring them into felt communion with God. In an age when man is imperiled by a domination of the material, and Christian profession is marked by form and fashionableness, the austerity and challenge of *The Imitation* provides not only a rebuke to ease and comfortableness, but also a serious call to face squarely the high cost of genuine discipleship.

Still another spiritual classic is *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence, a lay brother in the monastery of the Discalced (barefooted) Carmelites in Paris where he worked in the kitchen for forty years as "a servant of the servants of God" until his death. The quality of his Christian life enabled him to clothe the most menial tasks with a sacramental significance. It was in the kitchen that Brother Lawrence learned to practice the presence of God, and he in turn imparted his method to others, thus enabling successive generations of Christians to live for God in the everyday walks of life--in the kitchen, office and factory. "It is not necessary for being with God to be always at church," he writes. "We may make an oratory of our heart, wherein to retire from time to time, to converse with Him in meekness, humility, and love." Concerning the best method he advises: "You will tell me that I am always saying the same thing: it is true, for this is the best and easiest method I know; and as I use no other, I advise all the world to it. We must know before we can love. In order to know God, we must often think of Him; and when we come to love Him, we shall then also think of Him often, for our heart will be with our treasure." The set times of prayer for Brother Lawrence were not different from other times. Indeed, he discloses his secret in this personal testimony in the "Fourth Conversation" as follows: "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity, as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament."

No listing of the great spiritual classics would be complete without *The Pilgrims's Progress* by John Bunyan. It has been more widely read than any book but the Bible. Bunyan wrote it while imprisoned at Bedford. It passed through ten editions before Bunyan's death. His earlier experience as a soldier in the Parliamentary army provided him with many of the figures found in the book. Actually, for all their allegorical names, the characters are real people--men and women in various

walks of life. And what an array of characters! Appropriate names, often amusing, but representing flesh and blood, move across the pages of this greatest of allegories. For example: Mr. Talkative, Lord Carnal Delight, Mr. By-ends, Lord Time-server, Mr. Facing-both-ways, and Mr. Two-tongues, the parson of the parish. Look at the names of those vivid personalities who comprised the jury at Vanity Fair: Mr. Blindman, Mr. No-good, Mr. Malice, Mr. Love-lust, Mr. Live-loose, Mr. Heady, Mr. High-mind, Mr. Enmity, Mr. Liar, Mr. Hate-light, Mr. Cruelty and Mr. Implacable. In Part Two are those admirable characters, Great Heart and Valiant-for-Truth. One cannot forget the description of the picture of a preacher that Christian was shown in the house of the Interpreter, as the pilgrim set out on his journey for the Celestial City: "It had eyes lifted up to heaven, the best of books in its hand, the law of truth was written upon its lips, the world was behind its back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over its head." This book, one of the greatest in Christian literature, has followed the Bible to every land. Its influence and inspiration are immeasurable.

Other devotional classics could be mentioned that have had a wide reading, though not equally appealing to every reader. For instance, there is William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, which had such influence in John Wesley's early life, and *The Private Devotions of Lancelot Andrewes*. The journals of George Fox, John Wesley, and John Woolman have provided both information and inspiration to many.

Our list would not be complete without calling attention to John Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*.

The Notes, as they are often called, and the *Standard Sermons* were the doctrinal standards prescribed by Wesley for the Methodist Preaching Houses. Though often neglected in the past, the Notes are coming more and more into their own again. The volume includes Wesley's own translation of the New Testament and his brief commentary and annotations on the text. Many are finding this work by Wesley to be spiritually refreshing. He wrote the Notes primarily for the common man, and usually they are concentrated, practical theology written in an extremely concise form. Both clergymen and laymen are discovering their spiritual value, and concur with the opinion of Adam Clarke: "Always judicious, accurate, spiritual, terse, and impressive; and possess the happy and rare property of leading the reader immediately to God and his own heart." Utilizing Bengel's *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*,

which he esteemed so highly, Wesley sought through his brief comments and spiritual guidance to bind men to the Word of God. There are many treasures throughout the Notes that are both illuminating and inspiring. For example, in his comment on II Corinthians 3:18, Wesley writes: "Moses saw the glory of the Lord, and it rendered his face so bright, that he covered it with a veil; Israel not being able to bear the reflected light. We behold His glory in the glass of His word, and our faces shine too; yet we veil them not, but diffuse the lustre which is continually increasing, as we fix the eye of our mind more and more steadfastly on His glory displayed in the gospel." There is a gem in his comment on John 6:44 ("No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day"): "No man can believe in Christ, unless God give him power. He draws us first by good desires, not by compulsion, not by laying the will under any necessity; but by the strong and sweet, yet still resistible, motions of His heavenly grace." There is spiritual depth, insight and counsel in this comment on Revelation 5:4 ("And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon"): "The Revelation was not written without tears; neither without tears will it be understood."

Wesley's Letters likewise have devotional value. The John Telford edition in eight volumes has a total of 2,670 letters, dealing with a wide range of human interest--spiritual, physical, moral, mental, political and economic. As Telford observes in the "Introduction," "The devotional and spiritual significance of the Letters grows upon us as we read them." Wesley's able employment of, and keen insight into, the Scriptures, as well as his common sense and expert guidance in the affairs of life, make his Letters a wellspring of spiritual blessing.

In our own time there are devotional books that give promise of becoming spiritual classics not only because of the manner in which they are meeting spiritual needs, but also their wide circulation which indicates their hold on a new generation of believers. Mrs. Charles E. Cowman's *Streams in the Desert* is one of these. There has been a constant demand also for *A Diary of Private Prayer* by John Baillie since it first appeared in 1936.

There is an element of timelessness in these various devotional classics. It is because these men of God learned the secret of communion with God. It is a soul-enriching experience to read and digest their thought. In our time there is need of a vital synthesis between the spiritual values which belong

to the lives of the saints and practical mystics whose lives centered in God, and the genius for activity and practicality in the work of the Lord. The holding of correct doctrine, for all of its importance, is not sufficient. There must be living communion with God and with His Son Jesus Christ. Only in this way will we behold the glory of the Lord in daily life and grow in Christlikeness.