

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY 202: SPIRITUAL WISDOM FROM SCRIPTURE

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is not first a set of beliefs. First, it is a Way of Life.

In our way of life, we follow Jesus by conforming ourselves to the divine, rather than being formed by the world. Many people adopt the ways of the world uncritically. But we examine worldly things through the light of our scriptures to discern the good, the just, and the beautiful, as would a traveler with a guide book. In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul said it like this:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”¹

This primer is an overview of how we gain spiritual wisdom through reading and contemplating scripture; of how it becomes for us the “Word of God in Christ.” When we accumulate spiritual wisdom, the fog of life lifts, issues clarify, decisions become easier, and our place in the world in this world is built, as Jesus taught, on solid rock.

Jesus used to tell this parable:²

²⁴Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on

¹ Romans 12:2. In National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition*, 1989, 1995, ed. Michael D. Coogan, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, p.2029. Hereafter known as *NRSV*.

² The parable of the wise and foolish builders, in Matthew 7:24–27.

rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell - and great was its fall!

What then is spiritual wisdom?

It is knowledge of the holy Spirit moving within our life and being, gained over a lifetime of following the Way of Jesus,³ through

- learning to remove our faults and practice the virtues,
- reading and contemplating scripture, and
- conforming our being and lives to the divine will,

under the guidance of acknowledged teachers within a faithful community.

As we gain in spiritual wisdom, we move into an everyday process of learning and personal transformation. (What in life is of God and how can I conform to it?) The process creates a virtuous cycle. We learn new biblical meanings and these give us new insights into the world and into our selves, which help us to act in new ways. Our wills gradually soften and we begin to allow the divine will to work in us and cooperate with it. These new behaviours help create in us a new mind able to transcend suffering along the Way of Life. And we grow in wholeness and holiness into the mystery of God.

The following teaching on the lifelong process of gaining spiritual wisdom comes from Abbot Nestoros (c. 380 C.E.), one of the Desert Fathers (there were also Desert Mothers). These were ascetic hermits who began to live in the Scete desert in Egypt in the 200s C.E. The solitary hermits then began to live in community with each

³ In the three-stage process taught by the tradition: *purification* (of mind and body), *illumination* (seeing from God's perspective), and, *union* with (becoming like) God.

other and their lifestyles and teachings inspired people everywhere. Christians from far and wide made pilgrimages to learn from the desert monks.

Of Abbot Nesteros, we know precious little. C.S. Gibson, who translated *The Conferences* in 1894, says that the abbot that may have been known as *o megas* (“the Great”), and he was a friend of St. Antony, the first of the desert fathers.⁴

His teaching was recorded by John Cassian. In the 380s C.E., Cassian spent three years in a monastery in Bethlehem, and then visited the monks in the Egyptian desert with his mentor and friend Germanus. Cassian later founded a monastery near Marseille in the Egyptian tradition. There he wrote two books: the *Institutes*, on organization and rules), and the *Conferences*⁵ (on the desert monks’ teachings).

The *Conferences* contain a record of the conversations with the Egyptian ascetics. Some hundred years later, Benedict of Norcia, the founder of the Benedictine Order, used Cassian’s work to write his monastic Rule, and ordered selections from *The Conferences* to be read at the monks’ evening meal.⁶ So the teachings of the desert fathers became the heart of monastic life in medieval Europe.

This primer summarizes John Cassian’s “Conference XIV,” in which Abbot Nesteros explains the process of gaining spiritual wisdom.

⁴ Based on the ancient book called *Vitae Patrum*, (Lives of the Desert Fathers), as noted in *Cassian*, p.397, footnote 1.

⁵ *The Conferences Of John Cassian*. Translation and Notes by Edgar C.S. Gibson. From: *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Vol. 11*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/cassian/conferences.html> accessed on 20 July 2020, p.396. Know hereafter as *Cassian*.

⁶ From the Latin title, *Collationes patrum in scetica eremo*, comes the word *collation*, a light meal :=)

ON LEARNING SPIRITUAL WISDOM

a) *Spiritual wisdom is two-fold.*

It consists of:

- (1) ethical knowledge (of our own self), and
- (2) contemplative knowledge (from scripture).⁷

Ethical knowledge is gained through reducing one's faults and learning good ethics. In order to reduce one's faults, one has to change one's mind and then change one's behaviour. As we all know, that is easier said than done. (St. Mary's Aides-Mémoire so far has three articles focused on Christian ethics.)

Contemplative knowledge is gained through reading and reflecting on the sacred scriptures. Section d) in this primer is the longest and it focuses on this topic.

b) *First, pursue ethical knowledge.*

One absolutely cannot acquire spiritual wisdom without first attaining ethical knowledge of one's self.⁸ Abbot Nesteros quoted from the book of Wisdom (1:4-5) to make this point:

⁴“Because wisdom will not enter a deceitful soul,
or dwell in a body enslaved to sin.

⁵ For a holy and disciplined spirit will flee from deceit,
and will leave foolish thoughts behind,
and will be ashamed at the approach of unrighteousness.”⁹

⁷ From Chapter I: “The words of Abbot Nesteros on the knowledge of the religious,” in *Cassian*, p.397. Gibson translated it as “practical knowledge;” today we would call it ethics.

⁸ From Chapter II: “On grasping the knowledge of spiritual things,” in *Cassian*, p.398.

⁹ The Wisdom of Solomon, *NRSV*, p.1451.

c) *Ethical knowledge is also two-fold.*

(1) We must come to know all of our faults and their natures, and how to cure ourselves from them.

(2) We must get to know the virtues and how to conform our mind to them. The goal is that we may become obedient to the virtues, not through force, but by delighting in virtue's natural good.¹⁰

Abbot Nesteros emphasized the importance of this first step:

“For in what way will one, who has neither succeeded in understanding the nature of his own faults, nor tried to eradicate them, be able to gain an understanding of virtues, which is the second stage of ethical training, or the mysteries of spiritual and heavenly things, which exist in the higher stage of contemplative knowledge?”¹¹

d) *Contemplative knowledge is fourfold.*

One learns this through regular scripture reading and reflection. Reading scripture can be difficult; the Bible can be confusing to our modern eyes. It is after all a great library that contains many different books, which vary greatly in topics, genres, voices, cultures, and historical development.

It confounds us when we read poor translations, or when we hear others talk about it in weird ways, or when people try to makes us do things that they say it demands. It confounds us especially when we read it without simultaneously working on our own ethics. It's a lot like eating a cactus fruit: tough to peel, but then very sweet taste.

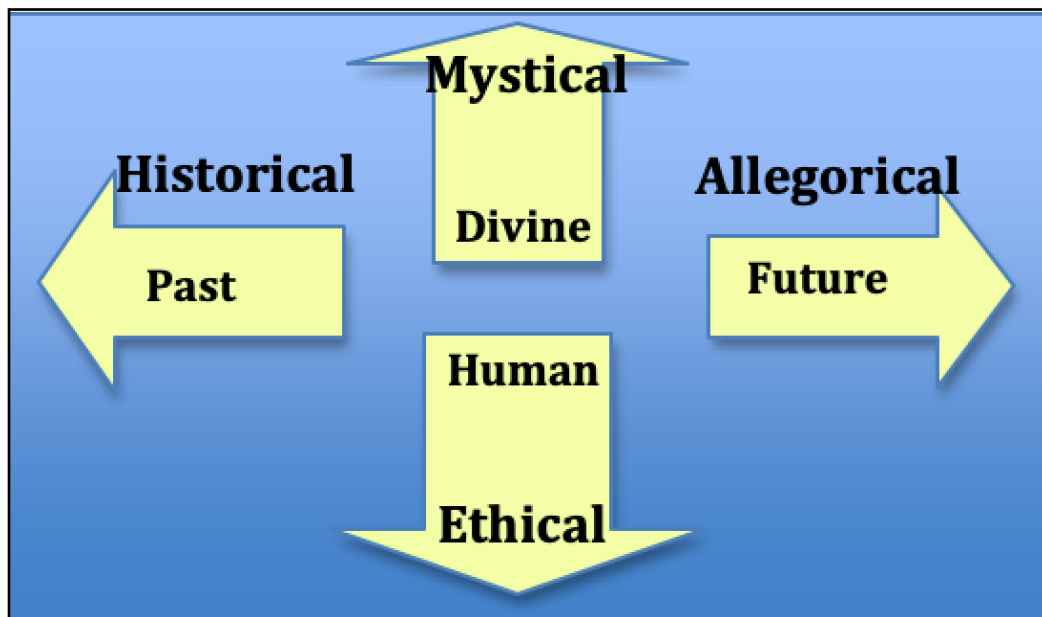
¹⁰ See the primer “Christian Ethics 102: Character & Virtues.”

¹¹ Cassian, p.399.

Happily, our tradition teaches us how to read and contemplate scripture, such as this by Abbot Nesteros. He taught John Cassian to read and reflect using the “four senses of scripture.” These are:

- (1) the *historical* sense,
- (2) the *ethical* sense,¹²
- (3) the *allegorical* sense, and
- (4) the *mystical* sense.¹³

The Four Senses of Scripture



The counter-clockwise movement of interpretation

This four-fold contemplation of scripture became widespread during the medieval period. (See for example Thomas Aquinas on “Whether in Holy Scripture a word may have several senses?”¹⁴)

¹² The technical term used by the abbot is “tropological.” Try saying that three times fast.

¹³ The technical term used by the abbot is “anagogical.” Yowzah, what a word :=)

¹⁴ *Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 10, ad I. at

<https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm#article10>

The four senses of meaning point in four different directions:



the *historical* points to the past and to the ordinary meaning.



the *ethical* points down into the human heart.



the *allegorical* points forward to the future in Christ.



the *mystical* points “upward” to the spiritual and the ultimate.

Abbot Nesteros said that these four senses could “coalesce in one subject.” He used the example of the city of Jerusalem. To him, the word “Jerusalem” could have four senses:



historically, as the real city of the Jewish people.



ethically, as the interior “city of God” within us, which is supposed to do good things, but can also do bad things.



allegorically, as the Church of Christ, a “shining city on a hill.”



mystically, as the heavenly city (for example, as in the hymn, “Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest...”¹⁵)

Biblical words, phrases, and stories could therefore be read in four senses.

Note that it doesn’t have to, always and everywhere. The senses of scripture are four possibilities, not four requirements!

Let us look a bit closer then at these four senses.

¹⁵ *Common Praise* #78.

(1) The historical sense

Abbot Nesteros said: “The historical sense embraces the knowledge of things past and visible...”¹⁶

The historical sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of the writer. The reader views a passage in its historical context within its time and purpose of writing. Much of the time this is obvious and straight-forward. At other times, words require interpretation.¹⁷ This is just the common-sense process by which a person arrives at a reasonable sense of the meaning of a biblical passage.

Usually, such context is provided in a good study Bible. A study Bible is “annotated,” meaning each book has an introduction and the text has footnotes and comments to explain weird and wonderful things. The best one is *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version*.¹⁸ The NRSV translation is the usual Anglican preference; the literary descendant of the King James Bible.

For example, Mark’s gospel says that, on the night of his betrayal, Jesus and his disciples “went to a place called Gethsemane.”¹⁹ Wut? What is this place? Is it a town or what? How should I picture this in my mind?

When reading this passage, the notes in a study Bible helps explain what one is reading. In this case, we learn that Gethsemane was an olive grove with oil presses on the Mount of Olives, across the valley from Jerusalem. Now we can “see” the scene with our mind’s eye.

¹⁶ From Chapter VIII: “Of spiritual knowledge,” in *Cassian*, p.405-7.

¹⁷ The technical word is “exegesis.”

¹⁸ Look it up on Amazon.ca and then buy it at an independent used bookstore.

¹⁹ Mark 14:32, *NRSV*, p.1858.

Before discussing the next three senses, it is important to note three cautionary rules about their use.

These are:

1. The historical sense should always be the primary sense;
2. The other senses should not contradict the historical sense;
3. Church doctrines should only be based on the historical sense; spiritual meanings should only illuminate doctrine.

(2) The ethical sense (i.e., the moral of the story)

Abbot Nestoros said: “The ethical sense is the moral explanation which has to do with improvement of life and practical teaching...”²⁰

Sometimes the moral sense is plain as daylight. Jesus commands us:

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”²¹

Well, it is plain, not easy :=)

In other passages, the moral sense may be more oblique; the story “turns” some of the meaning back on the reader so that we may apply it to our own life.²² For example, when we read the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke’s gospel (10:25-37), the moral sense prompts us to ask, “Am I like the priest and the Levite in the story? They passed by the beaten and robbed person on the road to Jericho without helping him, despite the teaching of their religion.”

²⁰ From Chapter VIII: “Of spiritual knowledge,” in *Cassian*, p.405-7.

²¹ Matthew 5:44-5. *NRSV*, p.1790.

²² The old term for the moral sense, the tropological came from the ancient Greek word *tropos*, meaning “turn.”

(3) The allegorical sense (i.e., “this” is like “that”)

Abbot Nesteros said: “To the allegorical sense belongs what follows, for what actually happened is said to have prefigured the form of some mystery...”²³

In literature an allegory is a story in which a character, place, or event is used to deliver a broader message about life. Authors use allegory to present complex ideas in ways that are comprehensible or striking to readers.

An example: In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus was talking about the book of Jonah and to him its story prefigured the mystery of his own future death and resurrection.

He said:

“For just as Jonah was for three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.”²⁴

In a similar manner, Christians have read many Old Testament stories as allegories of the future Christ and his Church.

It is worth noting that we readers may not force allegorical meanings on a story to promote our own worldviews.

For example, think of the fantastical interpretations of the book of Revelation. Chapter 13:15-18 talks about a “beast” (an “antichrist”) whose name or mark would be worn by people. The mark would be number 666. Many “predictions” have been made: “The end of the world is here and person X is the antichrist.” However, no such an allegorical meaning is valid, because the historical meaning is fixed.

²³ From Chapter VIII: “Of spiritual knowledge,” in *Cassian*, p.405-7.

²⁴ Matthew 12:40, *NRSV*, p.1800.

A good study Bible shows that the author, John of Patmos, was referring to the Roman Emperor Nero (54-68 C.E.). In Hebrew numerology, the number 666 referred to “Nero Caesar.”²⁵

(4) The mystical sense

Abbot Nesteros said: “The mystical sense rises from spiritual mysteries even still more sublime and sacred secrets of heaven...”²⁶

One of my favourite passages is from the apocryphal book of Wisdom 3:1-9.

Verse 1 says:

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment will ever touch them.”

It is a reading for Hallowmas and for funerals, and we often read it on Remembrance Day. It is a lodestone of my life and hopes. It has sustained me through many trials and has always been for me a portal to my personal “communion of saints.”

In summary of the four senses of scripture, here is a little poem from the medieval era:

The historical sense shows us what God and our fathers did;
The moral sense gives us rules of daily life;
The allegorical sense shows us where our faith is hid;
The mystical sense shows us where we end our strife.

Let’s then move on to the other points from Abbot Nesteros on the lifelong process of gaining biblical wisdom through ethical training and contemplative knowledge.

²⁵ NRSV, study notes, p.2220.

²⁶ From Chapter VIII: “Of spiritual knowledge,” in *Cassian*, p.405-7.

e) Three requirements of the practice of reading scripture.

(1) Work continuously on humility, through the ethical training of working on one's own faults and virtues, as noted in point two above.²⁷ An arrogant mind will not profit from scripture.

(2) Learn from one's elders in the parish community and the wider church, through the worship services, personal contact, study groups, videos, and any opportunities which may arise.

(3) Learn to let go of the world's anxieties and thoughts when reading scripture. The Abbot says one is continually to let go of the world when doing sacred reading, "until continual meditation fills your heart, and fashions you so to speak after its own likeness."²⁸

f) There are two benefits in regular reading of scripture.

(1) While occupied in reading scripture, the mind will learn to avoid the world's anxieties and thoughts. (That is, a mind which is humble, ethical, and continually practicing to let go of the world.)

(2) While at rest and in sleep, the mind will process what was read, studied, and memorized, and will reveal meanings which had escaped us while reading, and over time, it will renew our souls.

Abbot Nesteros put it like this:

"But as the renewal of our soul grows by means of this study, Scripture also will begin to put on a new face, and the beauty of the holier meanings will somehow grow with our growth."²⁹

²⁷ From Chapter IX: "How from practical knowledge we must proceed to spiritual," in *Cassian*, p.408-9.

²⁸ From Chapter X: "How to embrace the system of true knowledge," in *Cassian*, p.410-11.

²⁹ From Chapter XI: "Of the manifold meaning of the Holy Scriptures," in *Cassian*, p.412-13.

g) The three stages of progress in spiritual wisdom.

Abbot Nesteros also discussed the three stages of spiritual growth.³⁰ (For a fuller introduction to these three stages, please see the aide-mémoire “Christian Spirituality 201: Mysticism – Consciousness of the Divine.”)

(1) The first stage is called *purgation*.

This is the struggle with ridding the mind of the world’s thoughts through learning Christian ethics: seeing our faults and removing them, and, acquiring the virtues (as discussed above).

(2) The second stage is called *illumination*.

This is the long process of storing biblical wisdom in one’s body, from which to draw from during life’s difficulties and happiness (as discussed above.)

(3) The third is divine *union*.

This is the final stage when heart and imagination are occupied fully by the divine. Jesus of Nazareth exerted such a powerful influence on the history of the world because his first followers saw this unity of human and divine in him. For us Christians, Jesus is both a mirror of the best of humanity and a window into the nature of the divine.

Most of us will only enter this stage in the life to come. Meanwhile, we revere those saints of the church and our lives who have shown us how to progress on the Way of Life. (That is one reason why we at St. Mary’s emphasize our “saint of the week.”)

Abbot Nesteros explained it thus (in the very fine, flowery words of Gibson’s Victorian translation):

³⁰ The Desert Fathers knew the three-step process in Latin as *purgatio*, *illuminatio*, and *unitio*, or, in Greek as *katharsis*, *theoria*, and, *theosis*.

“And so if these things have been carefully taken in and stored up in the recesses of the soul and stamped with the seal of silence, afterwards like some sweet scented wine that makes glad the heart of man, they will, when mellowed by the antiquity of the thoughts and by longstanding patience, be brought forth from the jar of your heart with great fragrance, and like some perennial fountain will flow abundantly from the veins of experience and irrigating channels of virtue and will pour forth copious streams as if from some deep well in your heart.”

“And so, it will come to pass that not only every purpose and thought of your heart, but also all the wanderings and roving of your imagination will become to you a holy and unceasing pondering of the Divine law.”³¹

h) There are two reasons for ineffective spiritual learning.

(1) The teacher has little or no spiritual depth, and/or

(2) The student is a bad person who will not correct their own faults.

About this, Abbot Nesteros said:

“But it is certain that for two reasons the teaching of spiritual things is ineffectual. For either the teacher is commending what he has no experience of, and is trying with empty sounding words to instruct his hearer, or else the hearer is a bad man and full of faults and cannot receive in his hard heart the holy and saving doctrine of the spiritual man...”³²

³¹ From Chapter XIII: “Of the method by which we can remove the dross from our memory,” in *Cassian*, p.415-16.

³² From Chapter XVIII: “Of the reasons for which spiritual learning is unfruitful,” in *Cassian*, p.424.

CONCLUSION: TRUST IN THE GRACE OF GOD

In the mysterious dance of divine grace and our human free will, grace always leads.³³ This is wonderful news for those of us who find the scriptures bewildering at times, and who find it difficult to follow Jesus in today's complex secular world.

Abbot Nesteros quoted 1 Timothy 2:4, where it is said that "God our Saviour" is one "who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."³⁴ The abbot then said, "Sometimes in the lavish generosity of God in His Providence, it is granted that one who has not shown himself by an irreproachable life to be worthy of the preaching of the gospel attains the grace of spiritual teaching for the good of many."³⁵

I am much comforted by that thought. In conclusion, perhaps it would be helpful to learn to read or say this prayer before reading scripture. It really does say it all.

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures
to be written for our learning;
Grant that we may in such wise
hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,
that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word,
we may embrace, and ever hold fast,
the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.³⁶

Thank you for reading. ³⁷

³³ From Chapter XIX: "How often even those who are not worthy can receive the grace of the saving word," in Cassian, p.424.

³⁴ *NRSV*, p.2127.

³⁵ *Cassian*, p.424.

³⁶ The collect for the 2nd Sunday of Advent in our Book of Common Prayer.

³⁷ Compiled for the Anglican parish of St. Mary's, Russell, by Gerrit Botha, November 2020.