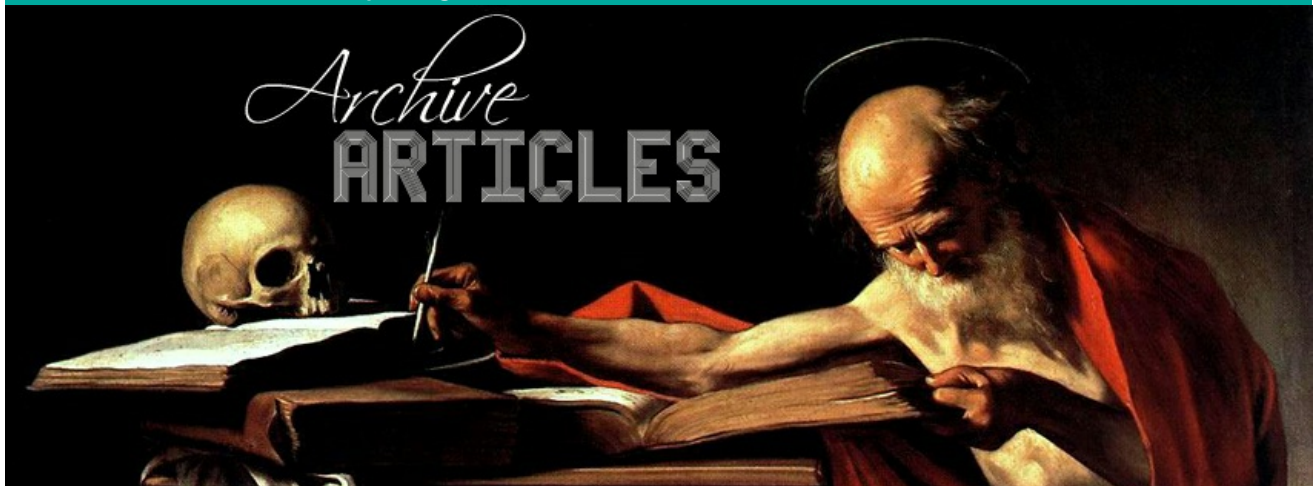




Lingering

I am really drunk as I am writing this right now, but I will do my best. This week, we are going under the apple tree. And as I entered that realm to pull out some bit of revelation to share, the hand of the Lord was again heavy upon me with holy intoxication.

Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste (Song 2:3).

Stepping into the shade of the Lord is to step into the secret place of His presence.

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in Him will I trust. Surely He shall deliver you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge. ... (Ps. 91:1-4).

In this shadow of the Holiest Place – in the presence of God where we find protection and sustenance, we are literally covered as with a blanket, with the thick, honey-like substance of His Holy Spirit. It is the warm, rich place of worship, where our spirits literally incubate and grow into maturity. There is no true maturity outside the presence of God.

In this deep place of His abiding presence, where our attention is captivated by God, we find that a number of principles are at work in us. Among these are healing, strengthening and life itself which begins to saturate us to the core (not as a direct result of our labor, or even of our intention to gain blessing. But these things simply splash over onto those whose focus is lost on the Lover of their souls). In fact, to pursue the Lord for these wonderful byproducts can be utterly selfish if our hearts are not foremost sold out to Him and Him alone.

Jesus is the Tree of Life, from whom we must eat. And in consuming His fruit, we find that we can tap into the Kingdom dynamic of "eternal life" immediately in the here and now. We are living our eternal life right now – it doesn't start when we get to Heaven, though it originates from there. Why wait until Heaven before we take advantage of its potential? We can begin to pull things from the spiritual realm into our life here on earth (Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven), when we know the heart of the Father. This was a basic principle of how Jesus operated in the miraculous. He spent hours tucked away in the presence of the Father, soaking in the atmosphere of Heaven. Now through Jesus, we have access to that same Heavenly dimension. The Kingdom is at hand.

:: tree of life ::

Jesus Himself is The Life. Many Christians live their entire lives still eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (note that good and evil have the same root). While their lives may not bear the semblance of sin, and in fact may bear the fruit of a number of "good deeds," the radiant presence of God, the spark of inner flame of life itself, is woefully missing. In their religious doldrums, they are often the last to recognize it, still trapped in the rights and wrongs of a moral law system, while never ascending to deep relationship with the Lord, which is really what true life is all about.

There were two trees in the garden. We are not called merely to good, and obviously not to evil. We are called to Jesus Christ, a living person. That is why when we pray, it is often beneficial to just let go of our thoughts and be still and quiet. Prayer is not a time to think about Jesus Christ or the Father or the Holy Spirit. Why sit around thinking about Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit when you can encounter them! Thoughts are nice, but an encounter is much more productive.

We are too busy and fretful to stop for God. We spend more time thinking about going into the prayer closet than we actually spend in prayer. And when we do stop for prayer, we rarely take the time to get centered and really focused on God. We've got a million other distractions and hang-ups. It takes a good 15 minutes just to get acclimated and to no longer feel guilty for not praying enough. Then, after that, we go through our intercessory list of needs and wants and asking and me, me, me. When will we ever get to the God stuff? Hear what He wants to say? I think prayer should be about 15 percent talking and 85 percent listening. And that's a conservative figure.

It is the performance system of do-gooding – that slavery mentality – that keeps our prayers limited to an obligatory intercession time, but never ascending to the ecstasies of actually visiting and enjoying the Lord just for who He is.

Getting back to the text, understand that the sustaining shade of the Lord covers us much more thoroughly than a mere branch. The apostle Paul says that we are "in Christ." We have a hiding place much deeper – we are inside of God. Much of our prayer should just be exploring the depths of God's inmost being. It is not just a conversation, it is an experience.

One time, in prayer with my daughter, we were both in the Spirit and we stepped into the Tree of Life. I saw in a vision that the Tree itself had a doorway, and inside was a room. As we entered it, there was a fire in the center that burned. Meanwhile, I knew that the enemy was pursuing us, and I felt that we were supposed to step into the fire. We did so, but the fire did not consume us. This fire is the burning presence of the Holy Spirit that rested on Moses' bush (a foreshadow of Jesus, aflame with the Spirit). As I stood in the center of the flame, the enemy was unable to draw near. It is in the center of the fiery presence of the Lord that we are made invulnerable. Even as the Spirit dwelled within Jesus, so He dwells within us. It is the eye of the storm that we are most safe

and protected in His refuge. In the fires of God's refining furnace, we are protected from the thugs of Babylon.

:: secret exposure ::

He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love (verse 4).

The covering presence of the Lord is truly a hiding place, but not the secretive, dodgy kind of hiding as is typical with the kingdom of darkness. In the Lord, all things – even things done before the Father in secret – are exposed in the light. Nothing is hidden that will not be revealed. Although we technically “hide” in God, he is loudly proclaiming and displaying Himself over us like a banner for all to see. The paradox is that, as we tuck ourselves away in secret with God, we begin to glow brilliantly. When we sneak away with Him, we are revealed. When you begin to hide and saturate in God's presence, it becomes plain to everyone. Humble yourself, and He will lift you up. On the other hand, if you exalt yourself, He will have to oppose you. But here in the place of God's presence, we are filled with the good things of His table. In the days of kings, everyone knew those who sat to eat the rich bounty of the king's table – they were the ones known throughout the land, because of their favor. To those who devote themselves to the Lord in secret, He will exalt them at the proper time.

:: the waiting ::

Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love (verse 5).

The shadow of the Most High is a place of strengthening. It is a place of quiet and waiting – just sitting with Him and being with Him. They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. Remember that waiting, tarrying, was a prerequisite for the disciples before they were endowed with power in Jerusalem after the Lord's ascension.

It is critical that we recapture the discipline of waiting in the stillness of the Lord's presence. Without the rich stream of contemplative prayer in our lives, we can never come into a quiet reliance upon the strength of the Almighty One. Our own strength will burn out quickly like the tail of a comet, but the Lord's strength is exponential. He moves from strength to strength – inviting us to likewise move from glory to glory. God is not like some nuclear reactor in the sky that will eventually run out of energy after its half-life is over. Nor is He like a dying star that slowly loses its fire. He is ever burning hotter, growing in intensity – as He will forever.

Do the angels always cry “Holy, Holy, Holy” because they are forever mesmerized – constantly discovering some new, unseen aspect of the Lord, which they are speechless to describe? Perhaps it is more than that. Perhaps the Lord Himself is ever “developing,” expanding, intensifying in His glory (not that there is a measurability or limit to His present glory. But perhaps the endlessly Perfect One is actually getting better all the time!). The nature of His eternal substance will forever be a mystery.

The point is, we must stop and take the time to drink in this God of wonder. We cannot be too busy. It is the “raisins” that strengthen us. Raisins are not a fruit of immediacy, or instant gratification, consumer Christianity. It takes time for them to soak in the sun. They speak of a lingering. Waiting.

There is also a freshness of expectancy we should have when we linger under the apple tree. There is also ripe, fresh fruit there that is picked just today. The rhema word – freshly spoken words that are rightly fitted for the moment. Rightly fitted apples. “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver,” (Pr. 25:11). The presence of the Lord is a place of refreshing and renewal, but we should not draw into the process of waiting without an expectancy that God is going to show up. To have faith is to know that He is with you. Waiting is not a boring duty or an end in itself. We linger in the presence because it is a place of sweetness and delight and fresh revelation.

And although we begin to be strengthened and refreshed in this place, we can hardly keep our balance, because we are “faint with love.”