

Christianity in the Age of Spirit
Series 1: Pilgrim's Progress
Part 5: How does Reason guide us on our journey?

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Scripture: 1 Kings 3:4-14; Matthew 19:30; 20:16; 1 Corinthians 14:15

Poetry: Excerpt from "Moving Waters" by Rumi

*When you do things
from your soul, you feel
a river moving you
along.*

*When actions come from another
section, the feeling
disappears. Don't let
others lead you. They
may be blind or, worse,
vultures. Reach for the
rope
of God.*

- Rumi

I. One Extraordinary Thing

God wants to do something extraordinary with your life of your own choosing. What will you choose?

In many religious circles, the idea that God wants *you* to be the one to choose might be considered theologically suspect. Isn't God supposed to be the chooser? According to the Bible, there are indeed times when God calls and we are expected to follow. But other times, God asks us what *we* want God to do for us.

In this regard, I'm reminded of a number of passages in the Gospels where Jesus tells his disciples if they ask anything in his name God will do it. (Matthew 18:19; 21:22; John 14:13; 15:7; 16:23) So, according to Jesus, the question is not, "Is God willing to give you something?" but "What will you choose in my name?"

That “in my name” part often trips people up. They assume that if you add Jesus’s name to the request, then – voilà! – it will happen ... then they are disappointed when it doesn't. But in the Bible, to do something “in the name” of someone means “within the nature and authority” of someone. In other words, Jesus is saying, “If you ask for anything that I myself would ask for,” God will give it to you. What kinds of things would Jesus ask for? Jesus is someone who followed a strong sense of Calling by God. He asked for things that helped him fulfill God’s Call. To ask God for something in Jesus’s name is to ask for things that fulfill your specific purpose for being here. So if you’re looking for God to give you that new Lamborghini you’ve fantasized about, my guess is that you’re out of luck. But if you’re looking for a life that will bring you more thrills, excitement, danger, satisfaction, and joy than driving a Lamborghini, there are a lot of things you can ask for that God is perfectly willing to deliver on.

If you’re going to ask God for anything, therefore, you may as well ask for something extraordinary. Why wouldn’t you? After all, you don’t need God involved if you’re going to ask for something that you could find on your own or with the help of other people. This is God, after all, the Creator of Heaven and Earth! If you don’t “go bold” at least once in awhile, then you should check your assumptions about what you think God is capable of doing for you.

Case in point: Solomon. In today’s Old Testament passage, God asks Solomon what God can do for him. Because he asked for something extraordinary – and it was something that fell within God’s nature and will to give – God granted Solomon not only Wisdom, but four other significant – but non-extraordinary – things as well: wealth, honor, power, and a long life. I call these latter gifts “non-extraordinary” because lots of perfectly miserable people have wealth, honor, power, and long life, and they can acquire these things without God’s help. If you have Wisdom, however, it’s hard to be miserable – not for long, anyway. And if God happens to give you more than you asked for, you will likely make wise use of them – which explains why God was so happy to give Solomon so many other gifts.

What’s the highest gift you can ask of God? What’s the gift that would turn all other gifts God could give you into “spiritual gold”?

Be careful here. Don’t just parrot Solomon’s request for Wisdom and expect to receive it. God was asking Solomon what HE wanted, not what you want. Solomon wanted Wisdom because he needed Wisdom in order to fulfill the work God had given him to do. God asks the same of you: “What is something I can

give you that you want and need in order to be the person you were sent here to be?” Now do you see why a request for a Lamborghini is far too low for you?

II. Five Extraordinary Things

When God asked Solomon what God could do for him, how do you suppose Solomon came up with Wisdom? Perhaps Wisdom was the first thing that came to mind. But my guess is that all kinds of ideas occurred to Solomon – some more extraordinary than others. Likely, those other, lower, things God said would be Solomon’s were on his list of possibilities – wealth, honor, power, and long life. Probably there were several quite extraordinary gifts on his list as well. Perhaps Courage, Faith, Hope, Humility, Generosity, or Gratitude. All of these are capable of producing a life that is exceptionally well lived.

What I am suggesting here is that Solomon probably didn’t ask for the first thing that came to mind. He made a list, at least internally, using his mind and his heart as a guide to consider what extraordinary things he could ask for. He chose Wisdom from among them.

I have a confession to make. When I think of something extraordinary to ask God for, I get excited. I get so excited that I want nothing better than to set the wheels in motion to help bring the idea to fruition. This is particularly true when I believe that the idea has come not simply from my own whim or fancy but that I’ve intuited something where my will and God’s will are in alignment.

For instance, this was the case when I first realized down deep in my soul that I wanted to ask Melanie to marry me. I knew just as deeply that my desire wasn’t merely my own, but was something that fell within God’s will for me – and probably for Melanie, too. So I rushed over to her house and asked her hand in marriage.

Some of you already know this story – that she turned me down flat. I think it may have had something to do with the fact that, the last time I saw Melanie two weeks earlier, I told her that I needed “some space” and asked to take a month’s break from our relationship!

Had I taken a breath before deciding to implement my plan and had, instead, done what I’m about to suggest that you do, I’m pretty certain things would have worked out better for both me and Melanie – not to mention my relationship with God at the time.

When it comes to making major life decisions, it is very helpful to use your head, as well as your heart, to make a list of *at least five* extraordinary prayers. If I would have done that, I'm sure that one particular "extraordinary prayer" would have occurred to me right away. I would have asked God to help Melanie forgive me for acting like such a jerk! Had I settled on that request first, then perhaps I would not have had to ask God for an even more extraordinary thing: that God would help Melanie forgive me for being an even bigger jerk by proposing marriage on the first evening I'd seen her after asking for a month's "space" ...

Just like Solomon, if we ask God for the right extraordinary thing, we find that God is perfectly willing to help us receive many others besides.

What extraordinary thing will you ask God for? Before moving on with this sermon, I suggest you make a list of five extraordinary prayers. Once you have your list, we can explore which possibility may make the others possible as well.

III. Arranging Love

According to St. Augustine, much of what we know as "sin" has little or nothing to do with choosing evil over good. Rather, it's about choosing the good over the best. In other words, what often trips us up hardest is our failure to put our loves in proper order.

I absolutely love eating chocolate chip cookies, especially when they're still warm from the oven. And I suppose that something in God – to be sure, something *quite small* in God – takes pleasure in my pleasure over a warm cookie.

Another thing I love is offering advice to my daughters when they are urgently in need of advice – and actually ask me for it. (Un-asked-for advice doesn't usually go well for me or them ...). I assume that God takes pleasure in me being helpful to my children. However, if one of my daughters urgently asks for my advice and I say, "Sorry, I'm too busy eating chocolate chip cookies," it doesn't matter if that cookie is warm or cold: my daughter is not going to be happy, and neither is God.

In the real world, of course, the choices are often far harder. We all love the approval of our peers, for instance. There's nothing essentially wrong with loving approval. But if we love the approval of our peers over our love for justice, that's a sin. And if we love justice more than we love grace and mercy, that's a sin, too. (How many of us can expect to pass through the "pearly gates" if we must meet

the requirements of God's justice to enter?) Lots of people these days don't like hierarchy very much, but when it comes to our many loves, a hierarchy definitely exists!

When we set our loves in proper order, life has a certain beauty and flow to it. As Rumi observes, you feel something like *"a river moving you along."* You receive far more than you give – far more love, far more grace, and even far more personal energy than you give out. So if you are feeling exhausted right now, you may want to make sure you have your loves in order. And if you're feeling exhausted all the time, then you'd definitely better check what loves are taking priority over others! As Rumi advises, *"Don't let others lead you. They may be blind or, worse, vultures. Reach for the rope of God."* In other words, sort out your loves until you can feel the flow again. The flow will draw you on. If you're constantly pushing it, then you're probably working against your most natural flow.

Here's an exercise I use to order my loves – particularly those "extraordinary prayers" I want to ask God to fulfill – to help sense their most natural flow:

First: I narrow down the field – because I can quite easily come up with more than five "extraordinary prayers." Generally, consider the possibilities in one of four primary life categories: (a) my inner, personal path; (b) my external, vocational path; (c) my desires for my biological family; (d) my desires for my faith family.

An easy way to remember these categories is to associate them with your hands and feet. Your feet ground you, and two of these categories ground you like feet: your inner, personal path and your family. Your hands represent the primary ways you serve as God's hands in the world around you, and so do the other two categories: through your vocation (or where you spend most of your time, if not in a vocation), and through your participation in your faith community.

Given our hands and feet each have five digits (fingers and toes), it's not only easy but fun to associate one "extraordinary prayer" with each digit.

If this seems a little abstract, I'm going to work through the rest of the process using one of these specific categories. Namely, the category that's common to all of us at Countryside: our faith community.

Second: Using our faith community as the example, I come up with five “extraordinary prayers” for our life together that I think represents both God’s will and my highest desires. So that we can get the “extraordinary” part right, here is a list of five “good-but-not-extraordinary” desires people might normally come up with:

- (1) A balanced budget.
- (2) Church growth.
- (3) People to be more committed to the church.
- (4) A successful move to the Tri-Faith Commons.
- (5) Members to pray and meditate more.

What makes these desires merely “ordinary”? Here’s what: We don’t need God’s help to achieve any of them. Here’s what the same list looks like when these “ordinary” prayers become “extraordinary”:

- (1) A budget that sets people dreaming about God’s mission again.
- (2) Worship attendance doubles, with greater diversity.
- (3) Our members’ highest goal is following God’s will for themselves, their family, their career, and their church to the best of their ability.
- (4) Countryside helps the Tri-Faith Initiative succeed beyond our dreams and those of the world.
- (5) The Holy Spirit sets this church on fire.

Now there’s a list that could only be accomplished by working together with God! But these are all way too big to pray for all at once. We need to set them in an order of priority and pray for the highest one.

Third: Arrange your “extraordinary prayers” from the highest and most important, to the lowest, least important. (Remember: they are ALL important, so arranging them won’t necessarily be easy.)

Fourth: Here’s the counter-intuitive part: Take the highest priority prayer and the lowest priority prayer and take some significant time to reflect on each of them. Do you remember Jesus’s observation that “the first shall be last and the last shall be first”? (Matthew 19:30, 20:16) When we take time to consider the “last and least,” we are often surprised to find that our highest priority is the very one we would have thrown away! Or, we discover that consideration of our lowest priority has changed what we perceive to be our highest priority in some way.

If you will work through these priorities in each of the four major aspects of your life, you, like Solomon, can expect God to be listening with an attentive ear and a willing heart. When your will and God's will converge, you can expect not only extraordinary things to result, but an extraordinary life.

Note: You may find the attached handout helpful when sorting through your "extraordinary prayers."

five extraordinary prayers

Hand – Vocation

1

2

3

4

5

Foot – Personal
Path

1

2

3

4

5

5

Hand - Faith Family

1

2

3

4

5

Foot - Biological
Family

1

2

3

4



GRĀ-LOVE

The symbol in the middle is the ancient Celtic symbol for "love." The cross on top helps us remember that all truly extraordinary prayers ultimately serve God. The five hash marks remind us to find five "extraordinary prayers" and set them in order

of importance. The two hash marks at the bottom remind us to reflect deeply on our "highest" and "lowest" prayers in order to confirm what our "highest" prayer actually is.