

The Spiritual Ascent

by Rebecca Bynum (April 2014)

[M]y body falls down without pushing, my soul does not go up without pulling; ascension is my soul's pace and measure, but precipitation my body's. And even angels, whose home is heaven and who are winged too, yet had a ladder and go to heaven by steps.

– John Donne (Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, II)

It is generally understood, as Christ taught, that once one accepts God's grace through a child-like faith, then he may enter the kingdom of heaven. But it should be obvious, too, that no one can remain as a child forever. All of us must grow up and fulfill our duties as adult spiritual beings. There is no magic wand to relieve us of the responsibilities to live according to righteous virtue and increasingly to reflect the truth in the widest circumference of our understanding. The journey does not end with the consciousness of salvation – it only begins there.

Those who say, "I am saved and will never fear sin," are deluding themselves and may fall into the trap of gradual justification of that which originates in their own hearts. Too often such men claim to be part of an elect few who can and do transgress the divine will, even flagrantly, in the name of God. Claiming to be of God's chosen, Joseph Smith decided he would marry more than one woman, and that his followers could do likewise, sending the rights of Mormon women back thousands years. He let himself think that his will and God's will were one and the same.

One need only ponder the fate of Lucifer to know that even those beings created far above the mortal state are not immune to sin. Until such a time when our meager souls merge with the divine spirit, so that our very beings, our wills and our souls are one with God, sin will always be latent and this potential is ignored at our peril.

The spiritual journey is marked by periods of both struggle and rest (the consciousness of attaining a new level of spiritual stasis). We do not move to the next level without difficult decision-making. Though it is true we do not save ourselves, it is also true we do not progress in the kingdom without effort and purpose – the higher nature overcomes the lower only by degrees. I do not claim to know how things are in heaven, but I doubt we magically

become perfect simply by passing over the threshold of death. Would the Father, having placed within us boundless curiosity and driving ambition, leave us with nothing but endless ennui following death? Would the Father who has created numberless galaxies provide no where for us to go, nothing for us to do and nothing more to learn for all eternity?



by Gary Larson

If we accept that as we progress in the spirit, that we simultaneously grow toward God and become more like him, that is to say, more perfect, and if we further accept that God's general plan enables slow, gradual progress (as in physical evolution), then it would be only logical to assume that our spiritual progress continues into the eternal future – we can never completely *become* God but we can draw ever closer by infinite degrees until as Donne declared:

I shall be so like God, as that the Devil himself shall not know me from God, so far, as to find any more place, to fasten temptation upon me, as upon God, nor to conceive any more hope of my falling from that kingdom, than of God's being driven out of it; for, though I shall not be immortal, as God, yet I shall be as immortal as God.

– From a sermon preached before King Charles I in April 1629.

The process of self-identification with God is a gradual replacing of old attitudes and old viewpoints with those of a higher reality – to see the world through God's love – all things becoming new. The believing soul is a soul in motion – a soul growing and yearning to grow, even though growth brings pain. Every time the better way is chosen, the lesser way flings up its recriminations and regrets. One can't choose that which is higher unless one recognizes that which is lower and consciously turns away from it. It's easy to behave like a child in the name of spirituality and seek unrestricted self-will. It is easier to pretend that nothing we do is *really wrong*, but that way madness lies. Self-mastery, leading to spiritual maturity, is difficult. It is a life's, even an eternal life's, journey.

Rebecca Bynum's latest book is