

Ann Voskamp - an open letter

Dear Ann,

I've read your book 'One Thousand Gifts' with mixed feelings. *Admiration* because of the way you write. I can't define why and how, but it is very special and enthralling. Next to admiration I also experienced *recognition*. A search for the real Christian life is something I recognize in my own life. Many things you have discovered were also important discoveries for me. But besides admiration and recognition also *sadness*, because your search resulted in something completely different in the end compared to the result that this search delivered me. Your and my interpretation are even complete opposites.

This sadness is the reason I write you this letter. To you, and to everyone who has read your book. I will try to point out the most important elements.

Our history

When I read your story, I get the impression you grew up in a warm community of Christians, with a weekly celebration of communion. I fully recognize this, this was also the case for us. In chapter 8 you wrote that you accepted Christ and were baptized when you were 16. Believe it or not, but this was also the case for me! Of course, I knew about the gospel, I've heard it many times. But this one time, the sermon of one brother really touched my heart: if I don't repent and turn to God, I would be lost forever!

After this the real search starts on how to live a Christian life, and not only on the outside, but mostly on the inside. For you this search might have been even harder than for me because your experiences in your life early on raised the question if God was really good.

Is God really good?

This question arose when your little sister got killed by a lorry and this question stayed for the rest of your life¹:

"Can there be a good God? (...) How can He be good when babies die, and marriages implode, and dreams blow away, dust in the wind? (...) For years, we come up empty. And over the years, we fill again – with estrangement. We live with our hands clenched tight. (...) If He truly, deeply loves me, why does He withhold that which I believe will fully nourish me? Why do I live in this sense of rejection, of less than, of pain? Does He not want me to be happy?"

Bookcases full have been written on the subject if God is good. But also the Bible is full of it. One of the books in the Bible where the hardest struggle on this subject is visible, is the book of the Psalms. Look at David's cry in Psalm 13: *"How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"* He sees nothing of the Goodness of God in his current situation. On the contrary, he only feels sadness. Still he knows that God is good and that he needs to hold on to that by *trusting*, by *believing*. He says: *"But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me".*² David knew the salvation of the Lord and rejoiced himself in it.

¹ Page 12-15

² Psalm 13:5-6

The *'salvation of God'*, that is the core! The redemption that God made possible and offers to us. For you and me this means that we know the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, who died *for me* on Calvary's cross. The *'salvation of God'* encloses the results of His work. Forgiveness of sins, redemption from debt, justification, eternal life and so much more! We need all our life to grow in this knowledge! One of the most important results of knowing Christ and His work is joy and worship, just like David.

Whether God is good or not is not a question anymore for those who know this salvation of God. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"*³. This does not mean that life cannot be very difficult. But the foundation is this: I will not perish, God gave His only Son for me, I believe Him and have eternal life!

In your book I could not find that you took ownership of the *'salvation of God'*. That you know that Christ bought you with his precious blood and that nothing or nobody can snatch you out of His hand⁴. Paul calls onto every Christian to examine themselves to see whether he or she is *'in the faith'*.⁵

Who shows us the way?

In your book you cry out to fellow believers in the community: who can give me the answers to the questions I'm struggling with? I understand that there were no people in your direct environment who could show you the right path. It hurts to read:

*"But, someone, please give me – who is born again but still so much in need of being born anew – give me the details of how to live in the waiting cocoon before the forever begins? (...) I am groping for my own way. Desperately feeling along today for a way to live through this fleeting blink of a life. How do we live fully so we are fully ready to die?"*⁶

What is real Christian life? Who gives you the keys? Apparently, nobody and that is why you keep searching. You read a lot and unfortunately you end up at writers who, without you noticing, bring you further away from your goal. Who send you a way which is not in line with the Bible. I will not go into depth in each writer you are citing, that would be too distracting. But I will try to follow your search and test your findings against the Bible.

Eucharisteo

You discover that *'thanksgiving'* is the key to a full Christian life and the way you explain it I can fully agree with. For this was also a search: what is the core of the Christian Life? What is the key to the secret? And indeed: that is *'thanksgiving'*!

But once we start filling this in we both see something completely different. For you is *'giving thanks'* – which you call *eucharisteo* – the key to what you call *'the miracle'*. At the beginning of your journey you ask yourself the question *"Might a life of eucharisteo really work the miracle if the God-communion?"*⁷ This *'communion with God'* is what you desire and by practicing much *eucharisteo* you will experience this in a special way.

³ John 3:16

⁴ John 10:28 "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."

⁵ 2 Corinthians 13:5

⁶ Page 28

⁷ Page 36

Communion with God?

You are looking for 'communion with God' and you want to experience this. You think that this is possible through the world around you and write "We don't see the material world for what it is meant to be: *as the means to communion with God*"⁸. You are convinced that you can meet God in the world around you and everything you see. Examples from your book are

- New toothbrushes
- The crunching of the first frost
- The squeaking of an old swing
- The click of a seatbelt
- Warm woolen turtlenecks
- The strange smell of cattle and straw

But the creation and the world around us are not intended for 'communion with God'. In the creation Gods eternal power and divine nature are visible⁹. But Gods heart we can only know through His Son Jesus Christ.

*"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well (...)"*¹⁰.

We can only know what is in Gods heart for us if we look at Jesus Christ and the work he completed. The Lord Jesus said that He is the way to the Father and that there is no other way! Communion with God is only possible if the Lord Jesus Christ is the most important person in our heart; because He is also the most important one for God the Father! Jesus Christ is the common denominator for Gods heart and our heart! This is what I've learned from the Bible and this also means everything for 'thanksgiving'. I will get back to that in a moment.

See things differently?

According to you to meet God we have to learn to see things in the world around us differently. Also, in situations of sin and chaos we could discover God. But we need intense and difficult practicing to learn to see differently. You write for instance:

*"(...) and it's St. John who whispers it clear too, how to find God in the mess: 'We [actually] saw His glory For out of His fullness (abundance) we have all received [all had a share and we were all supplied with] one grace after another and spiritual blessing upon spiritual blessing and even favor upon favor and gift [heaped] upon gift' (John 1:14, 16 AMP, emphasis added). That's the mystery map to the deep seeing!"*¹¹

*"The practice of giving thanks ... eucharisteo ... this is the way we practice the presence of God, stay present to His presence, and it is always a practice of the eyes. We don't have to change what we see. Only the way we see. (...) But if we don't intentionally commit to the hard practice of seeing, don't we die in barren wilderness?"*¹²

But with John there is nothing mysterious in seeing. He doesn't seek God in Chaos, as you are writing. He walked with Jesus, He spoke to Jesus, and has seen Jesus¹³, simply with his eyes. And in everything he has seen of Him and from everything Jesus spoke and did, he could see and

⁸ Page 16

⁹ Romans 1:20

¹⁰ John 14:6,7

¹¹ Page 128,129

¹² Page 135, 136

¹³ See also 1 John 1:1-3

understand who He was, the eternal Son of God. Because of this John did understand Who God is, the God no one can see. He is the 'invisible God'¹⁴. This means that we cannot see God with our senses, we cannot experience him physically. John says this:

*"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (...) And the Father Himself, who sent Me (...) You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. (...) because whom He sent, Him you do not believe"*¹⁵.

The Bible doesn't tell us anywhere that we should look at the world in a different way to meet God. We need to get to know God in His Son, He sent to die for sinners. We need to believe Him, as the citation from John says.

This is something completely different than what you write: "That in the right inner looking, we can gain the right outer life . . . the saved full life? (...) faith is always a way of *seeing*, a seeking for God in everything. And if the eyes gaze long enough to see God lifted in a thing, how can the lips not offer *eucharisteo*? The truly saved have eyes of faith and lips of thanks. *Faith is in the gaze of a soul.*"¹⁶

Your experiences

You describe that you, based on what you see and experience, practice '*eucharisteo*', repeatedly. This brings you in a state of mind where you really observe the world around you in a different way. You give examples such as:

- "(...) the bubble's dome and color bands deepen, fire-blue swirling flame into lurid scarlet. A kaleidoscope planet. (...) Yellow marbleizes into indigo dark. I do see this. I hol dit. This is where God is. In the present. (...) the holiness of the space. The God in it. Far curvature of the bubble eddies, violet sliding down. This is supreme gift, time, God Himself framed in moment. (...) The bubble arches into the dome of a cathedral. (...). An dit is *eucharisteo* curving the moment into a zupola of grace, an architecture of holiness – a place for God. Thanks makes now a sanctuary."¹⁷
- "I watch the hummingbird, become her, drink the sweet right out of now."¹⁸
- "Faith is the gaze of the soul and I want to *see in*. So I can *enter in*. *Enter in God*. (...)"¹⁹
- "I murmur *eucharisteo* thanks in a pile of laundry and the world expands and heightens and deppens an surges with the glory of God and I can feel the body decreasing and the soul increasing and joy filling the breadth between."²⁰
- "(...) He is bone of my bone and flesh of my fles hand I am His and He is mine and I want to touch the paint. I want to run my fingertips across oils, let the colors saturate my skin, let them run into my blood. I want to be in the painting, *Supper in Emmaus*, the painting to be in me. I want to be in God and God to be in me, to exchange love and blessings and caresses."²¹
- "Who wouldn't cower at the invitation to communion with limitless Holiness Himself? (...) I can hear Him. He's calling for a response; He's calling for oneness. *Communion*. (...) Mystical union. This, the highest degree of importance. God as a Husband in sacred wedlock, bound together, body and soul, fed by His body, quenched by His blood (...)"²²

¹⁴ See for example Exodus 33:20; 1 Timothy 6:16, Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 11:27

¹⁵ John 1:18 and 5:37,38

¹⁶ Page 114,115

¹⁷ Page 69,70

¹⁸ Page 80

¹⁹ Page 119

²⁰ Page 168

²¹ Page 217

²² Page 211,213

I think it is honest that you describe precisely what happens, how you experience the things around you and what you experience inwardly. You call it experiencing a mystical unity.

Mysticism: the way to God?

The description of your experiences reflects what happens: a way of practice which helps you into a higher level of consciousness. This changes your perception of things, shapes and colors change, your own consciousness disappears, and you experience unprecedented unity with all things around you. You experience an indescribable inner love, which you call community with God.

You experience this as a reality of a completely different class than life down here. It lifts you above the normal life; it is the 'full life' as you call it. You are convinced you have truly found God, the 'mystical unity' as you have found them with believers in the middle ages.²³

Your experiences are real, and I will not argue them. I won't argue how you describe them. But there is just one question: Are these experiences really from God?

You are not alone!

People from all ages have had your experiences²⁴. All religions know spiritual or mystical directions where people strive for the same experiences as you have been doing. In their writings of this search they do not talk about God and Jesus and they do not cite Bible verses, but they call their own gods and their own religious views. One of the religions which is most known for this is Hinduism, with its mindfulness as a current mystical variation.

Even without religion, all these experiences can be felt. The well-known atheist and scientist Sam Harris proves this in his book 'Waking Up'²⁵. He is an adversary of religion, and also of Christianity. His conclusions on the human spirit and mind do not stroke with the Bible, but many of his descriptions give insight in the methods and the results of a higher consciousness. I will cite a few points of the last page of his book; some points that might sound familiar to you.

"Spirituality starts with amazement about the daily things which can bring us to insight and experiences which are far from everyday experiences. (...) every present moment of consciousness is deep. (...) How many your mistakes are, something inside of you is pure – and only you can recognize this. Open your eyes and see"²⁶

The conclusion is that your experiences are the same as others, non-Christians, even atheists, who bring their consciousness into a higher level. You claim to experience God and have community with God.

But then it would be that you would receive experiences from God and a Hindu from some sort of Hindu god. Sam Harris denies the existence of an invisible world. Yet he has the same experiences and he proclaims that this is part of the characteristics of a human being. This means there can be only two possibilities:

1. Similar mystical experiences are from *different* sources. Many Christians who experience God inwardly accept this view; you as well, because you claim to seek God and, in the end,, have community with Him. If this is incorrect, only possibility 2 will be left.

²³ Page 209

²⁴ See for example <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism>

²⁵ Simon & Schuster: 'Waking Up – Science, Skepticism, Spirituality', reprint June 2015

²⁶ Waking Up, Dutch version page 196

2. Similar mystical experiences are from *the same* source. This is the opinion from Harris and for him this source is the human being itself, its spirit and consciousness. This is his only explanation because he denies the existence of an invisible reality where there is a God and there are idols.

The Bible teaches us – and I will try to explain this in the next section – that the mystical experiences are from the same source, namely satan and his demons.

Approaching God – with your mind

The Bible shows us an invisible world which is normally for humans not perceptible. In this world are God and the angels, but also satan and his demons. We cannot see or perceive them, but the Bible clearly describes this.

The Bible also describes the people who do not know or acknowledge God, who have and serve their own gods. The God of the Bible redeemed a people from Egypt, with the purpose of bringing Him sacrifices²⁷. They would serve Him in a way different from the way all the nations serve their gods²⁸. To not be tempted they had to eradicate all the peoples in the land Israel and the book of Deuteronomy shows us the extensive warnings for this.

“Take heed to yourself (...) that you do not inquire after their gods, saying: ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way.” (Deuteronomy 12: 30, 31, also 12:4).

This clearly shows that they should not approach the Lord their God in a similar way as the people who do not know God approach *their* gods and serve *them*. The people who do not know God contact their gods in the invisible world by manipulating their consciousness. Gods people were not allowed to approach their God in a similar way. If they would do so, they would get in touch with the idols of the people. That is why the Bible calls this idolatry. We are warned also in the New Testament by the apostles. Also, Paul warns the Christians in Corinth against idolatry (from which they were converted) by saying: ‘and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.’²⁹.

We cannot approach the God of the Bible and have communion with Him by manipulating our consciousness. If we do this, we certainly will have special experiences, but these are coming from demons and not from God!

This is a similar deception satan presented to Eve and what he presents to humans since the beginning. “In the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”³⁰

God shows us a way how we can get to know Him, which is the ‘way of understanding’, as it’s written in Proverbs 21:16: “*A man who wanders from the way of understanding will rest in the assembly of the dead*”. If you do not follow the way of understanding, you will end up in the invisible world of spirits. The apostle John says:

*“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an **understanding**, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.”*³¹

²⁷ For example, Exodus 5:3

²⁸ See the book of Leviticus

²⁹ See 1 Corinthians 10:20

³⁰ Genesis 3:5

³¹ 1 John 5:20-21

The Bible is not unclear. We must use our understanding, our normal consciousness, to approach God and we should not do this in a way the nations approached their gods. We shouldn't manipulate our consciousness to experience the invisible world.

Approaching God – as priests with sacrifices of praise and thanks.

God wanted to live with his people. First in the tabernacle and later in the temple in Jerusalem. But this was only possible if they kept the services of sacrifices the way God had initiated them³². The letter to Hebrews shows (for example in chapter 9) that the sacrificial service in the old testament is an image of the perfect sacrifice of Christ.

Christians are called to bring God the Father and Jesus Christ 'sacrifices of praise and thanks'³³. For this reason, He has made us to a nation of priests³⁴, to people who know what Christ has done for them on Calvary's Cross and bring him thanks for this.

Of course, we should thank God for all good things he gives us, and the Bible calls us to do so. But the greatest we can give God is praise and thanks for the Christ's work on the cross. God the Father is looking for worshippers who worship Him in spirit and truth³⁵.

Dear Ann, you discovered that giving thanks is the key to the full life. This is correct, but not in the way you fill it in. The Lord Jesus has said himself that we cannot approach God except through Him: He is the way to the Father. "No one comes to the Father except through Me."³⁶

Christ the crucified

The big question in our life is: 'who is the Lord Jesus Christ for me?' Have I repented to God to start with and have I accepted the Lord Jesus as my redeemer who died for me and paid my debt? Do I realize every day that without Him I would be lost, and do I think Him for the salvation which he provided for me? He desires that we, just like the cured leper, return to Him, thank Him and worship God³⁷.

I have discovered that I must do this daily and very consciously: thank Him and honor Him for His work on Calvary's cross. With 'consciously' I do mean not with 'a higher consciousness', but with full understanding and normal consciousness. I had to discover that this will not be beyond the heart, but that God's Spirit awakens feelings in my heart for Christ.

This is the secret that I am still discovering. This is the core of Christian life: giving thanks for the work Christ did at the cross! It is a secret every believer should discover. Paul calls this among other things: 'the mystery of Christ'³⁸. The Lord Jesus died for me, that's how it starts. But the next step is and will be to keep loving Him and give thanks. This is the full life, "*And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*"³⁹.

You write somewhere about Psalm 50:23: "*Whoever offers praise glorifies Me; And to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God*". When we thank Christ, we honor Him. This is the way how we can see more and more of the salvation of God. We will get to know God our

³² See for example the book Leviticus

³³ See for example Hebrews 13:15, Colossians 2:7; Ephesians 5:4; Philippians 4:6

³⁴ 1 Peter 2:5,9

³⁵ John 4:23

³⁶ John 14:6

³⁷ Luke 17:15-18

³⁸ Ephesians 3:4

³⁹ John 17:3

Father and His Son, our Lord Jesus more and more and we will understand more – although always imperfect – and more of the marvelous plan of salvation God has provided. Until we are with Him!

Are you in faith?

Dear Ann, I hope and pray you will understand that the Bible says your experiences are not from God. You wrote that you were 16 when you repented. To the Corinthians, who were occupied with idolatry as well, Paul calls to examine themselves to see if they 'are in the faith'⁴⁰.

I would like to call out to you to do the same: examine yourself if you truly have the real faith in the Lord Jesus Christ! Do you know that you are a lost sinner who – without Christ – would be lost for eternity? Do you know that Jesus Christ died for you personally to buy you free, and to make you His. If this is not the case, admit your guilt and lostness and accept Christ as your Savior and Lord. And thank Him for this every day!

⁴⁰ 2 Corinthians 13:5