

Ann Voskamp – an open letter

Dear Ann,

I've read your book 'One Thousand Gifts' with mixed feelings. First of all, I *admire* your writing style. I cannot quite put my finger on it, but it's definitely special and compelling. Besides admiration, there is also a lot of *recognition*. The search for a true Christian life is something I recognize from my own life. Many things you have discovered were also important discoveries for me. But besides admiration and recognition there is also *sadness*, because in the end, your search has led to a result that is completely different to mine. In fact, your and my interpretation are complete opposites.

This sadness is also the reason why I'm writing this letter to you. To you and to everyone who's read your book. I will try to point out some of the most important issues.

Our history

When I read your story, I get the impression that you grew up in a warm community of Christians, where the Lord's Supper was celebrated every week. I fully recognize this, because I grew up in similar circumstances. In chapter 8, you wrote that you accepted Christ and were baptized when you were 16, and believe it or not, this was also the case for me! Of course, I was familiar with the gospel message, because I had heard it many times before. But one time, the sermon of a brother really touched my heart: if I did not repent and turn to God, I would be lost forever!

The search for a true Christian life: where to go?

After this, the real search starts on how to live a Christian life, and not only on the outside, but especially on the inside. The search might have been more difficult for you than it was for me, because when you were young, you had to deal with circumstances in your life that made you wonder whether God was really good.

Is God really good?

You asked yourself this question when your baby sister got run over by a truck and it stayed with you ever since. You write, among other things, [\[1\]](#):

"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?"

There's a plethora of books on the question whether God is good. And even in the Bible we find people who've asked the same question. One of the books in the Bible where we perhaps most frequently find the struggle with the question whether God is good, is the book of Psalms. For example, in Psalm 13, David cries out: "*How long, O Lord, shall I have sorrow in my heart daily?*" He sees nothing of God's goodness in his own circumstances. Neither does he experience it in his heart. On the contrary, he only feels sadness. Still, he knows that God is good and that He needs to hold on to this by *trusting*, by *believing*. He says:

"But I have trusted in Your mercy; my heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, **because He has dealt bountifully with me.**" [2]

David knew God's salvation and he rejoiced in it.

The '*salvation of God*', that is crucial! The salvation is the redemption that God has procured 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 the cross of Calvary. The '*salvation of God*' mainly encompasses the results of His work. Forgiveness of sins, redemption of guilt and reconciliation, justification, eternal life, and so much more! We need our whole life to grow in this knowledge! One of the main consequences of knowing Christ and His work is joy and worship, just like David.

Whether or not God is good is not a relevant question anymore for those who know the salvation of God.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." [3]

This doesn't mean that life is never difficult. But the basis is this: I will not perish, God gave His only Son for me, I believe in Him and have eternal life!

In your book, I did not find that you personally 'appropriated' the '*salvation of God*'. That you know that Christ has bought you with His precious blood and that nothing or no one can snatch you out of His hand [4]. Paul calls on each Christian to examine themselves as to whether he or she is truly '*in the faith*' [5].

Who will show us the way?

In your book you cry out, as it were, to fellow believers in the community: who will give me the answers to the questions I'm struggling with? I understand that there weren't any people in your direct surroundings who could show you the right way. It chills me to the bone when you write:

“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 the true Christian life? Who has the keys? Apparently, nobody, so you keep searching.

You read a lot and unfortunately, you come across authors who - without you realizing it - steer you even further away from the truth. They steer you in a direction that is not conform the Bible. I will not discuss the authors that you cite, because that would be too distracting. But I will try to follow you in your search and examine your findings in light of the Bible.

Eucharisteo

You discover that 'thanksgiving' is the key to a full Christian life and when you phrase it like this, I can agree one hundred per cent. This was also my search: what is the core of the Christian life? What is the key to the secret? And indeed: it is 'thanksgiving'!

We can use the same words, but mean something entirely different.

Once we start looking at this in more detail, it turns out we both mean something completely different. To you, 'thanksgiving' – which you call *eucharisteo* – is what gives you access to 'the miracle', as you call it. At the beginning of your search, you ask yourself: “Might a life of *eucharisteo* really work the miracle of the God-communion?” [7] This ‘communion with God’ is what you're longing for and which you can eventually experience in a special way by practicing *eucharisteo*.

Communion with God?

You are looking for the 'communion with God' and would like to experience it. You think this is made possible by the world around you and you write “*We don't see the material world for what it is meant to be: as the means to communion with God*” [8]. You believe you can encounter God in the world around you and in everything you see. As examples from your book, I take the following things:

- New toothbrushes
- The cracking of the first frost
- The squeaking of an old swing
- The clicking sound of a seat belt
- Warm woolen turtlenecks
- The odor of livestock and straw

But creation and the world around us are not means through which we can have 'communion with God'. In creation, we see God's eternal power and divinity^[9]. But we can only know God's heart 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 God's heart for us, when we look at Jesus Christ and the work that He has done. 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 when the Lord Jesus is the most important person to us; because He is also the most precious to God the Father! Jesus Christ is the common denominator for God's heart and our heart! This is what I've learnt from the Bible and that's what it comes down to when we speak about 'thanksgiving'. I will get back to this later.

Learn to see differently?

To encounter God, you believe that we should learn to see the world around us in a different way. We could also discover God in situations of sin and chaos. But learning to see differently requires difficult and hard experiences. You write, for example:

“(...) 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*’ (John 1:14). 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 to John there is nothing mysterious about the seeing. Neither does he search God in the chaos, like you write. John walked with Jesus, spoke to Him and saw Him^[13], simply with his own eyes. And from everything he saw of Him, everything he heard of Him, and everything He did, he understood Who He was, namely the eternal Son of God. Therefore, John also understood who God is, the God no one can see. He is the ‘invisible God’^[14]. This means that we cannot perceive God with our senses, nor experience Him bodily. John says:

“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].

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that we should start seeing the world differently to encounter God. We need to get to know God in His Son, whom He sent to die for sinners. We need to believe Him, just like it says in the cited verse.

This is completely different to 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 how you repeatedly practice ‘*eucharisteo*’ based on what you see and experience. This brings you in a state of mind in which you can truly perceive the world differently. To describe this, you give the following examples:

- “(...) 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 hold it. This is where God is. (...) 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. (...) And it 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 deepens and 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 flesh and 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 (...)”[\[22\]](#)

I appreciate how you honestly describe what happens, how you observe the things around you and what is going on inside of you. You say it yourself that you experience mystical union.

Mysticism: the way to God?

The descriptions of your experiences show what happens: a path of practice by which you can arrive at higher state of consciousness. And with it changes your perception of things: forms and colors change, the awareness of 'self' disappears and you experience unprecedented union with the things around you. You describe an indescribable inner love, which you label as communion with God.

You experience this as a reality which is on a whole different level than the life here on earth. It lifts you above the normal experiences of everyday life; it is the 'full life' as you call it. You believe you have truly found God, the 'mystical union' which you also found among medieval believers[23].

Your experiences are real and I don't want to dispute them. Neither the way you describe them. Only one question matters: are your experiences truly from God?

You are not the only one!

People of all times have had these experiences[24]. In all religions we find spiritual (or mystical) movements that pursue the same experiences you were searching for. In the accounts of their searches they naturally don't speak of God and Jesus and they don't cite bible verses, but they name their own gods and their own religious views. One of the most well-known religions, in that respect, is Hinduism, with mindfulness as the modern mystical variant, if I may call it that.

Even without religion it's possible to have these experiences. The renowned atheist and scientist Sam Harris shows this in his book 'Waking Up'[25]. He is a firm opponent of religion and especially of Christianity. His conclusions about the human mind and consciousness do not stroke with the Bible, but many of his descriptions will give insight in the methods for and results of a higher state of consciousness. I'll cite a few things from the last page of his book; things that might sound familiar to you.

"Spirituality begins with a reverence for the ordinary that can lead us to insights and experiences that are anything but ordinary. (...) every present moment of consciousness is profound. (...) However numerous your faults, something in you at this moment is pristine - and only you can recognize it. Open your eyes and see."[26]

The conclusion is that your experiences are similar to those of others, non-Christians or even atheists, who bring their consciousness to a higher state. You believe that you experience God and have communion with God.

But then the phenomenon occurs that you receive experiences from God and a Hindu from a Hindu god of sorts. Sam Harris denies the existence of an invisible world. Yet, he has the same experiences and explains this by saying that they are part of human properties. There are only two possibilities here:

1. Similar mystical experiences come from *different* sources. Many Christians who have inner experiences with God are of the same opinion; you too apparently, because you believe you're looking for God and have communion with Him in the end. If this isn't true, there's only one other possibility.
2. Similar mystical experiences come from *the same* source. This is what Harris believes to be true and the source, in his opinion, is man himself, his mind and consciousness. According to him, this is the only possible explanation, because he denies an invisible reality in which a God and idols exist.

The Bible teaches - and I'll try to explain it here below - that mystical experiences come from the same source, namely satan and his demons.

Approaching God - with your understanding

The Bible speaks of an invisible world that, normally speaking, cannot be perceived by us, people. In this world exist God and the angels, but also satan and his demons. We cannot see or perceive them, but the Bible describes it clearly.

The Bible also describes how nations that do not (ac)know(ledge) God, have and serve their own gods. The God of the Bible set a people free from Egypt, with the purpose that they would bring Him sacrifices[27]. They were to serve Him in a manner that was different to how all the nations served their gods[28]. To avoid any temptations, they had to eradicate all the nations that were in the land of Israel, and in the book of Deuteronomy they are warned about this extensively.

“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 12:4,30,31).

It is crystal clear from this passage that they are not allowed to approach God in a way that is similar to how other nations, that do not know God, approach and serve their gods. Well then, the nations that don't know God come into contact with their gods in the invisible world by manipulating their consciousness.

God's people weren't allowed to approach God in the same way. If they were to do so, they would come into contact with the idols of the nations. That's why the Bible calls this idolatry.

God's people think they are serving God and approaching Him. That's what they're saying, too. While, at the same time, they do not recognize that their experiences originate from the idols (the demons)!

Also, in the New Testament, the apostles warn against idolatry in several places. Paul warns the Christian church in Corinthians against idolatry (from which they were just converted) by saying that he doesn't want them to have '*fellowship with demons*'[29].

We cannot approach the God of the Bible and be in contact with Him by manipulating our consciousness. If we did, we wouldn't be experiencing the wonderful things of God, but those of demons!

This is the deception that Satan used with Eve and which he has been using with people throughout the ages and still is. If you eat from it, *"your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God."*[\[30\]](#)

God shows a way through which we can know Him and that is the 'way of understanding', as it says in Proverbs 21:16: *"A man who wanders from the way of understanding will rest in the assembly of the dead (= ghosts, phantoms)."* When you stop following the way of understanding, you will find yourself ending up in the invisible world of the 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.**"*[\[31\]](#)

So, the Bible is clear on this. We have to approach God with our understanding, i.e. our normal state of consciousness, and not in the way that the nations approach their gods. So, we shouldn't manipulate our consciousness to experience the invisible world.

Approaching God - as priests with sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.

God wanted to live among His people. First in the tabernacle and later in the temple in Jerusalem. But this was only possible if they adhered to the sacrificing services, the way that God had instituted them[\[32\]](#). The epistle to the Hebrews (e.g. chapter 9) makes it clear that the sacrificing service in the Old Testament is a picture of the perfect sacrifice of Christ that was to come.

Christians are called to bring 'sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving'[\[33\]](#) to God the Father and Jesus Christ. That is why He has made us to a nation of priests[\[34\]](#), to people who know what Christ has done for them on the cross of Calvary and who are giving thanks because of it.

Of course, we may thank God for all the good things He has given us, and the Bible even calls us to do so. But the greatest we can give God is praise and thanks for the work that Christ has done on the cross. God the Father is seeking true worshipers who worship Him in spirit and truth[\[35\]](#).

Dear **Ann**, you discovered that thanksgiving is the key to a full life. That's right, but not in the way you interpret it. The Lord Jesus Himself said that we cannot approach the Father 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 lives is: 'who is the Lord Jesus Christ to me? First, have I repented to God and accepted the Lord Jesus as my Savior who died for me and paid my debt? Do I realize each day that I was lost without Him and do I thank Him for the salvation that He has worked? He longs for the moment that we, just like the healed leper, come to Him to thank Him and praise God[37].

I have discovered that I need to do this daily, consciously: thank and honor Him for His work on Calvary. With 'conscious' I don't mean 'a higher state of consciousness', but with a full understanding and a normal state of consciousness. I had to discover that God's Spirit will then evoke emotions in my heart for Christ.

That is the secret I'm currently discovering. This is the core of the Christian life: *thanksgiving for the work of Christ on the cross!* It's a secret each believer needs to discover. Paul calls it, among others, '*the mystery of Christ*' [38]. The Lord Jesus died for me. That's what it starts with. But what follows and remains is to love Him and thank Him for it. That is the full life, "*the eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*" [39].

Somewhere you write 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 and that is the way where we will see more of the salvation of God. We will get to know God our Father and His Son, our Lord Jesus, increasingly better and we will understand increasingly more - albeit always in part - about God's great plan of salvation. Until we are with Him!

Are you in the faith?

Dear Ann, I hope and pray that you understand that the Bible says that your experiences aren't from God. You wrote that you were saved when you were 16. Paul called upon the Corinthians, who were also engaged in idolatry, to search themselves whether they were 'in the faith'[40].

I want to call upon you too: search yourself whether you really have the true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ! Do you know that you are a lost sinner, who, without Christ, is lost forever? Do you know that Jesus Christ died for you personally to set you free and make you His own? If not, I urge you to confess your sin and lostness and take Christ as your Savior and Lord. Convert from the way you're going now and go back to the cross of Calvary. Start again with Christ, the crucified, and thank Him daily for His great work!

I wholeheartedly pray this for you.

[1] Page 10-13

[2] Psalm 13:6

[3] John 3:16

[4] John 10:28 “And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”

[5] 2 Corinthians 13:5

[6] Page 28

[7] Page 34

[8] Page 14

[9] Romans 1:20

[10] John 14:6,7

[11] Page 132

[12] Page 138,139

[13] Also, see 1 John 1:1-3

[14] See e.g. Exodus 33:20; 1 Timothy 6:16, Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 11:27

[15] John 1:18 and 5:37,38

[16] Page 117

[17] Page 71

[18] Page 81

[19] Page 122

[20] Page 172

[21] Page 223

[22] Page 217, 218,219

[23] Page 215

[24] Also, see e.g. <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mystiek>

[25] Publisher Nieuwezijds, original titel: '*Waking Up – Science, Skepticism, Spirituality*', 2014

[26] From 'Waking Up' Spirituality without religion', page 196

[27] E.g. Exodus 5:3

[28] See the book Leviticus

[29] See 1 Corinthians 10:20

[30] Genesis 3:5

[31] 1 John 5:20-21

[32] See e.g. the book Leviticus

[33] See e.g. 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

[40] 2 Corinthians 13:5