

Gary W. Moon

*Christian Meditation:*  
Experiencing  
the Presence  
of God

*A Conversation with  
James Finley*



After graduating from high school, James Finley did something unusual. He became a monk. For the next six years, he lived at the Abbey of Gethsemane and learned from one of the great contemporary spiritual figures, Thomas Merton. Now married and the father of two, Finley has built a career as a teacher, clinical psychologist, writer, and speaker. He is the author of *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, *The Awakening Call*, *The Contemplative Heart*, and

*Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God.*

I met Jim for the first time in the spring of 1982. He was in the process of applying to the clinical psychology program at Fuller Theological Seminary. I was a third-year student, and the dean had asked me to spend some time with Jim and give him an insider's perspective.

We met on campus for coffee. For Jim, becoming a psy-

chologist would be his third career. He had already put in time as a Trappist monk and a high school religion teacher. I remember thinking he was old and wondering if he would pay off his student loans with Social Security checks. I also remember that he seemed very quiet, reflective, and sincere.

Jim was admitted to the program, and our busy schedules afforded only a few other

interactions. But years later, after my own interest in contemplative spirituality had grown, I picked up a couple of his books, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* and *The Awakening Call*, and read them with great enthusiasm.

The most striking thing about Jim's writing was his ability to illuminate deep spiritual truth with such clear images and metaphors. Let me give you an example. In *The Awakening Call*, he uses the following analogy to describe the process that can lead to contemplative awareness. He compared the process to three phases of reading a love letter:

An analogy to the progression from spiritual reading to contemplation can be found in the example of a man reading a love letter. He begins to read attentively as a way of drawing closer to the one whose words touch his heart (spiritual reading).

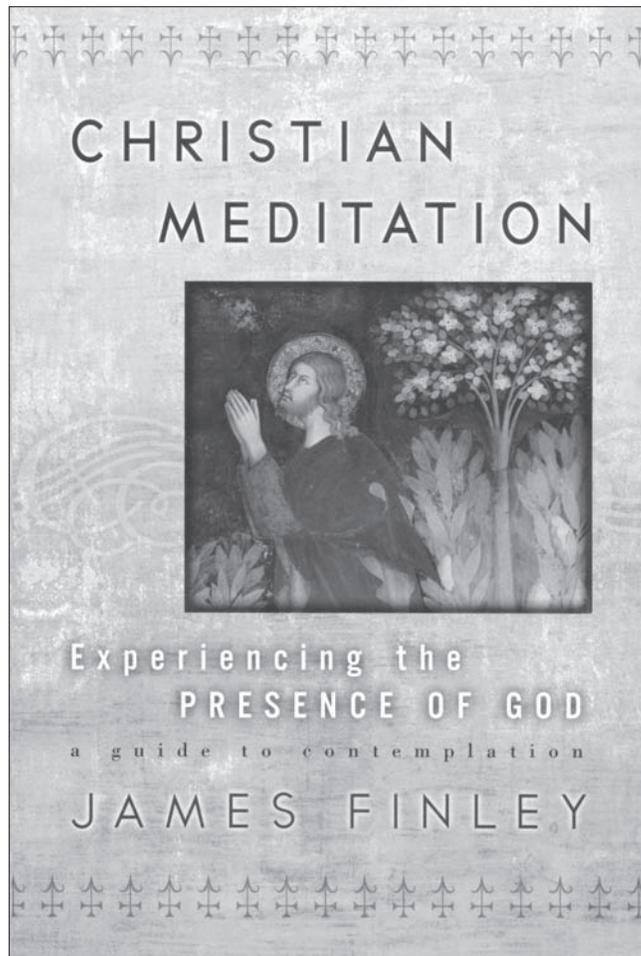
As he reads, he pauses, for her words initiate a reverie of love in which is set free a hundred hopes and images (meditation).

As he reads, the one who wrote the letter unexpectedly walks into the room. He looks up at her, saying nothing (contemplation).

I have followed Jim's life and career through the years. And I've forgiven him for not aging

any more. When the editors decided that the current issue of *Conversations* would focus on Contemplation, I immediately contacted Jim for an interview. He graciously complied.

**GWM:** I remember our first conversation—24 years ago



now. As a young graduate student, I was impressed that you had already written a book. When I asked you about it, you joked, "I wanted to call it *I Was a Teenage Monk*." And you were a teenage monk, and a directee and friend of Thomas Merton. Before we focus on your most recent book and contemplative prayer, please give us one snapshot from your time with Merton.

**JF:** Just to put it into a context, when I entered the monastery in the summer of 1961, I was right out of high school, and Thomas Merton, at the time, was master of novices, which means he was the senior monk assigned to the task of the spiritual formation of novices, those newly entering the monastic community, so it's in that context that I came under his guidance and direction. About every other week, I would meet with him one on one for spiritual direction. Also, he would give a talk once a week to the novices in the library, and then would also give a talk on Sunday, a second talk to the novices, to which all members of the community were invited, whoever wanted to attend. This meant there was a period—about 2½ years—during which I had these one-on-one sessions with him and then these two talks a week.

Because I entered so young, right out of high school, he was a father figure to me. And I also saw him as a person who was a living embodiment of the mystical traditions of the Christian faith. In other words, I saw him as one who bore witness to the reality of that tradition and I think, in that sense, I sat at his feet in this classical sense of sitting in the presence of someone who would mentor me in this path.

**GWM:** What are some of your most vivid memories from your time with Thomas Merton?

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**JF:** His continuous encouragement to be aware of the ways I was not being honest and genuine about myself and to interface this personal honesty with a radical commitment to the mystic path.

**GWM:** Jim, at the time you were a novice under Merton, did he always seem bigger than life, or were you aware of his humanness—for lack of a better word?

**JF:** Both. In one sense, when I was in his presence, I sensed I was in the presence of something very big, very real. I guess it would be analogous to what it would have been like to a person sitting in the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King or Mother

Teresa of Calcutta. He was one of those people.

On the other side of that same question, he was very open about his own shortcomings. I got permission to stay in his hermitage for a couple of nights after he died. While there, I asked myself, “Why is this place holy ground for me?” And I realized it wasn’t because the man who lived in this place had the answers; he never claimed to have the answers. It wasn’t because he did it right; he never claimed to do it right. He never said, “Do it like this.” But, rather, I think he gave witness to the ultimate irrelevancy of our failures and shortcomings when we live in this radical confidence in God’s love for us, which implies the moral imperative of doing your honest best to work on those things.

**GWM:** He never tried to convince you that he was perfect or that his transformation was approaching completion?

**JF:** Merton said somewhere that he learned to laugh at the very idea of perfection. This is one of the deepest points in his writings. We tend to think of there being some kind of arrival point beyond our foolishness, where we will no longer be susceptible to being just one more foolish human trying to get through another day. But Merton invites us to discover there is a profound level of our human weakness that we never get beyond. He once said, “The most real thing in your life is something you do not know and do not need to, because God loves you. It is in letting the acceptance of our weakness be our teacher that we discover the depths of God’s tender mercies.”

I say in the Merton talks I give that your issue could be having

a temper, and your last act on this earth could be throwing a bedpan before you die. So from the standpoint of the ego’s quest for perfection, it’s a discouraging thought. But that’s the whole point: the mystery of our union with God is not reducible to ethical, moral, or behavioral terms. It’s not reducible to any terms at all. It’s the ultimate irrelevancy of all things less or other than the absolute love of God for us as precious in our brokenness. Some of the Christian mystics speak of the gift of tears. By this they mean the tears that flow sometimes literally, sometimes as an interior sense of quiet joy and amazement in realizing that one is infinitely loved—without foundations for that love within one’s having earned it—and then walking in that divine love, living by it day by day.

**GWM:** I’ll need to give that some time to soak in. But I need to transition now to your book. In reading *Christian Meditation*, I was very surprised to learn that during your years of living as a monk, you were not taught how to meditate. In fact, there was no emphasis given to practicing any specific method of meditation during your time at Gethsemane. Did that surprise you at the time, and what was the purpose behind this absence of instruction?

**JF:** My sense of it is this: If we think of meditation in its broadest terms, we can think of meditation as a way of calming our minds and our hearts to offer the least resistance to the graced event of realizing oneness with God is our very life, our very reality.

Because this realization is a grace, we can’t reach it by our own efforts. But what we can

do, in a sincere way, is become as vulnerable as possible to the graced event of this awakening. So meditation can be understood as the process of assuming that interior stance of receptivity and openness to God the Spirit's awakening us to God's life-presence in our lives. If we understand meditation in that sense, then we can say that when St. Benedict wrote his rule, every aspect of the monastic life—the silence, chanting the Psalms, manual labor, the reading of Scripture, and prayer—was intended to be an aspect of perpetual meditative awareness of God's presence.

**GWM:** So meditation was presented more as an approach to all of living than the development and practice of a specific technique.

**JF:** Yes, meditation was presented as the life itself. If you do not resist it, the life itself fosters the awareness of God's presence. Of course, what you discover is that you do resist, or at least avoid, living in this openness to God. It is this awareness that brings self-knowledge and need to depend on God for guidance.

**GWM:** How does this make a difference in your life now as you drive to work?

**JF:** Well, let's say I am driving to work here in southern California during rush hour. I realize I can stop and remind myself, "In this moment, God is all about me and within me. In this moment, sitting here in the car on the way to work, I am being loved by God into this present moment. There is nothing missing here." Simply slowing down, taking a few breaths,

and reinstating myself in meditative awareness of God's presence help to keep me from being caught up in this busyness of things.

## Contemplative Prayer as a Progression

**GWM:** Jim, in the introduction to this interview, I referred to the analogy you used to describe contemplative prayer in terms of three movements or phases for reading a love letter—spiritual reading, meditation, and contemplation. In that analogy, you refer to the third movement as contemplation and state that it involves becoming lost in the real presence of the one you love.

What is it like for you when you become lost in the real presence of God?

**JF:** It's hard to express that in words. The analogy would be like asking someone who is married to describe his deepest feelings of love for his spouse.

But to make an attempt at it, I experience it in terms of presence. When I first sit in meditation, I renew my faith-awareness that in some manner I can't grasp or understand, God is already perfectly present, all about me and within me. I remind myself that God is not dualistically present, as if God were invisibly here alongside me. Rather, God is here as the reality of my very reality; God is loving me into the present moment; my very being is flowing from God as a gift of God. My very life is flowing from God as a gift from God; the present moment

is flowing from God as a gift from God. It's flowing from God as the concreteness of this very moment that I am sitting here. It's not a theoretical abstraction; it's the ultimate nature of the very concreteness of this moment of me sitting here.

Therefore, I seek in meditation to sit quietly, to become as attentive as I can be to the immediacy of God in me and beyond me in the present moment. So if I am sitting with my eyes lowered toward the ground, I see my hands in my lap and the floor. If a car goes by outside, I hear that. I try neither to cling to nor reject whatever occurs, so that I might realize God's presence in all that occurs. I try to stay with the immediacy of all that is occurring moment by moment, and so, too, with all feelings that come up within me. I try not to cling to or reject unpleasant feelings, nor do I cling to pleasant ones, but try to be open to God's presence in the mystery, the gift, of all my feelings.

As soon as I realize I am starting to drift away into

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daydreaming or thinking my thoughts, I simply return to this sustained awareness of being immediate and open to God in the present moment. I find that sitting like that is a way of coming to a profound sense of God as the living source of myself, others, and all things.

To use some examples where this more interior awareness awakens in the deepest moments of our lives, when a husband and wife are making love, there is a point at which they are aware of themselves and the act of making love. But as they mutually surrender themselves to their loving union, they become what making love is. In doing so, they experience together something of love's endless nature.

Another example is a mother nursing her infant. Up to a certain point, she is aware of herself nursing her infant. But in its deepest, most intimate moments, she somehow becomes non-distinguished from the mystery of what nursing her infant is. And in becoming what nursing her infant is, she intuitively senses the endless nature of this moment. At some point, we can begin to realize that every moment of our lives is, deep down, just like that. Every moment, deep down, is God loving us into the present moment, making the immediacy of each moment, each beat of our hearts, to be a divine gift. Meditation for me is way

of opening myself to the direct experience of this God-given godly nature of our lives.

**GWM:** How would you distinguish contemplative awareness—or perhaps what Gerald May might call a “unitive experience”—from contemplative prayer?

**JF:** I understand “unitive experience” to refer to those moments of spontaneous contemplative experience that happen to us. In the arms of the beloved, in moments alone at night listening to the rain, in a moment of

little, our underlying, habituated sense of God's presence at the heart of our ordinary awareness.

**GWM:** To clarify, you state that in Christian Meditation: “Whether I use the traditional Christian terms *contemplation*, *contemplative prayer*, or *mystical experiences*... I will always be referring to this interior, rich, mysterious depth of awareness that includes, even as it utterly transcends, the realm of ego consciousness and all that is less than God.” I think I'm following you. But first, would you mind distinguishing contempla-

tive prayer from other prayer forms, such as intercessory or petitionary prayer, in a way my saintly grandmother, who never meditated, could understand?

**JF:** Let's say that we first speak of our ordinary, day-by-day awareness just, say, as an “ego-self”

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deep joy or deep suffering, we can suddenly be grazed with a profound experience of oneness with all of life, with all of reality. I understand contemplative prayer to be the traditional term for meditation as I was speaking of it earlier. Understood in this sense, contemplative prayer is, then, a way of opening ourselves, inviting, or becoming as vulnerable as we can be to unitive experience. Contemplative prayer is the practice—it's the way of freely choosing to invite the unitive into our lives, so that eventually it becomes, little by

in the world. God wants us to have a healthy ego because when our ego isn't healthy, we suffer, and those around us suffer, and so there is a “grounded ego awareness.”

The next level would be ego-awareness illumined by faith: that is, the heart knowledge that there is a mystery beyond ourselves—from which our life comes and toward which our life is moving—that sustains us. This is our faith. But this faith still has the ego-self as its foundation. That is, we are still experiencing ourselves as our self-reflective,

bodily selves in time and space. We're still these human beings going through our days, and as these faith-illuminated ego-selves, we then ask God for guidance, which is the prayer of petition. We give God thanks, which is the prayer of thanksgiving. Or we realize our sinfulness—that we've fallen and we've hurt ourselves and hurt others—and in this awareness, our prayer expresses our repentance. And so on. So all these forms of prayer—prayers of gratitude, repentance, and thanksgiving—are the expressions of the ego-consciousness illumined by faith.

**GWM:** You're getting close, but give me one more example to make sure my grandmother is getting this. I'm only asking for her sake.

**JF:** The 16th-century Christian mystic Teresa of Avila taught that contemplative prayer begins

at the point in the midst of our prayers when we are not inclined not to ask God for anything or to thank God for anything. In fact, we are not inclined to think of anything at all. Rather, she says, we are inclined to rest wordlessly in the presence of God. The inner inclination to rest wordlessly in the presence of God is the dawning of contemplation. The dawning of contemplation is the realization that in some mysterious way, God has already taken us perfectly to himself. In some mysterious way, we are already living out our lives in God; and in Christ, God

is already taking us to himself. In this sense, our lives are already invincibly grounded in God, in whom we live and move and have our being. Contemplation is this mysterious realization of this oneness in which we are no longer a self apart from God asking for anything, but rather someone in God. And that's the unexplainable unitive realization of contemplation.

**GWM:** What, if anything, does this experience of oneness have to do with effort on our part?

**JF:** At first, it needs to be acknowledged as paradoxical.

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First, from the standpoint of contemplation, God's invincible love for me is absolutely sovereign, regardless of the degree or the extent to which I respond to it or not. That is, the deepest form of my powerlessness is that I am absolutely powerless to be anything but infinitely loved by God. The measure of God's love for me is never measured in terms of my response. The sole measure of God's love for me is the measureless expanse of God himself, given to me completely in creating me as a person in his image and likeness. That's the most important thing.

The flip side is the extent to which I realize God's oneness with me is my very reality, the extent to which I bear witness to this realization by the way I treat myself, others, and the earth that sustains us all. Here, I realize I must use effort; I must be committed, with God's grace, to face and work through all the ways I compromise and violate God's invincible oneness with me that is life itself.

We could say that the Parable of the Prodigal Son exemplifies the necessity of effort. The essence of the story is the son's coming

home with his memorized lines about how he doesn't deserve to be taken back. The power of his story is that his father is completely uninterested in anything he has to say. He is not even listening. He is already slipping the ring

on his finger, and the feast has already begun, and that's the contemplative realization, but that doesn't mean, then, that after the feast the next day, the son heads off again for another foray into foolishness. The son may have impulses to do that; he may have to go to twelve-step meetings to get help so he won't run off like that anymore, but now—whatever effort is required to discipline himself—he really understands it's just being faithful to love's nature. It's not based out of fear; it has been transformed.

# Contemplative Prayer and Union With God

**GWM:** Scripture says, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). You expound on this by saying that infinite love [God] creates our hearts in such a way that only an infinite union with infinite love will do. Is it fair to say that contemplative prayer is simply an experience of being with God in such a way that maximizes one’s awareness of his love and presence?

**JF:** I think it is helpful to approach this at two levels. First, in terms of the level of ego-awareness illumined by faith that I was referring to earlier, contemplative prayer is a way of maximizing one’s awareness of God’s love and

presence. But to stay at this level is reductionistic. It does not go beyond a psychological understanding. The Christian tradition teaches there is no finite reference point that is an adequate basis for understanding God’s will for us in creating us as persons in God’s image and likeness. Only an infinite, divine foundation is enough. Ultimately speaking, we are destined to know God as God knows God and with God’s own knowledge of God, which is Christ. And we are destined to love God as God loves God with the very love of God, which is the Holy Spirit. So, ultimately speaking, God’s will for us can be understood only in terms of a divinization through love and grace of very subjectivity, our most intimate experience of who we, deep down, really are. The mystical tradition of the Christian faith bears witness that we do not have to wait until

after we are dead to begin to awaken to this divinity of our lives. In silence and prayer we can begin, in some intimate, obscure manner, to realize divinity even now on this earth. This is a quantum leap beyond simply an enrichment of our ego experience.

**GWM:** This may seem off the subject, but I remember when I first went to visit at Fuller, I was looking for the campus and stopped to ask for directions. The person I asked was a student and told me I was already standing in the middle of the campus. I was already there.

You use a great analogy that reminded me of that. You say that the path to God is like that. We are asking where He is when He is all about us and within us. But why is this? Why do we seem to need directions to a place when we are already there?

**JF:** Yes, and let me give an example of how this happens in psychotherapy. Often in therapy someone will start to talk and begin to open up about his difficulties. I ask him questions about what he is saying and attempt to form a bond of genuine empathy with him in his suffering. As the person and I go on in this way, there begins to grow in me a sense of oneness with this person in his suffering. I begin to get a sense of how much courage it takes for him to open up like this and how hard it is for him to go through whatever it is he is going through. As this process deepens, I begin to sense we are on holy ground together. Now, this person and I were on holy ground together from the first moment he walked in the door. But it wasn’t until I entered into the process of

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opening myself up to the depths of his presence that I was able to become aware of that. Simultaneously for the person in therapy, he was on this same holy ground with me from the moment he walked in the door. But it was not until he began to open up, to trust, and to become vulnerable with me that he was able to begin to sense he was on the holy ground we all live on all the time as precious human beings.

In a similar fashion, the same process occurs in intimate relationships, in prayer, and in meditation. The process is one of learning not to keep skimming over the surface of the life we are living. It is learning not to continue in the momentum of moving on to some goal other than where we actually are at the moment, the momentum of being on our way to someplace else. The process is one of learning to slow down, to settle in, to open up, and enter into the interior richness of what's really going on. As we do so, we begin to discover the ways God is already present in the hidden depths of the present moment; it is just because we were skimming along across the surface of what is happening that we were unable to know and rest in that presence.

## God's Pursuit of Us

**GWM:** Jim, you describe three attitudes of your own heart that certainly resonate with me. You state, "[T]here is in me that which has long since passed through the open door into God. There is that in me that, in the very act of writing this sentence,

is passing through the open door into God. And there is that in me that loiters outside the door, still reluctant, confused, and afraid to enter." [p. 40] Please say more about why this third part of us seems so dominant.

**JF:** I think one way to begin is to consider alcoholics in the process of recovery. There is [something] in them that stands in the light of sobriety, [something] in them that struggles one day at a time to stay sober, and the addict in them that still, more than anything else, is determined to have another drink. With infinite variations, we all know this challenging, transformative process with all sorts of things in our lives. With respect to the contemplative path of realizing and living in the non-dual nature of God's oneness with me in all things, [part of me] is awakened to the ungraspable truth that God's oneness with me is my very life. [Part of me is] in the midst of the process of yielding to oneness with God in all things. And there are those aspects of the self that are still invested in illusory sense of being autonomously real, totally apart from and outside of God.

**GWM:** Would it be fair to refer to the struggle with those parts of ourselves invested in being autonomous and apart from God as an aspect of accepting our personal cross?

**JF:** Yes, I think so. If you want to say, as Jesus, unless you pick up your cross and follow me, you can't be my disciples—if we understand the cross in that text in the light of the discussion we are having right now, there is a line in Thomas Merton where he says,

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"For each one of us, there is that with which we must struggle very hard, or we know it will destroy us." He said this is the cross in our lives, and so the cross, in this context, refers to exposing and letting go of what we're clinging to so tightly as really an utterly inadequate and misguided sense of our identity as people who are unworthy or who can only find self-worth by what we achieve, or who can survive only by additively numbing ourselves to the experience, or who have to be duplicitous so we always have an escape route from intimacy so we don't have to risk being really hurt again. In this sense, accepting a personal cross is the crucifixion—that is, the dying to the tendency to identify with all those strategies—and this is—and I would say that would be a very deep way of understanding—like the cross and the ground of the mind.

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## Dark Night Question

**GWM:** This discussion also calls to mind the notion and imagery of a “dark night of the soul.” In *Christian Meditation*, you refer to the dark night as the “time in which God weans us away from our tendency to base our security and identity on anything less than God.” [p. 137]

Jim, you are a psychologist and a spiritual director. Please give us your best way to distinguish a dark night of the soul from an episode of clinically significant depression.

**JF:** The question has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the question pertains to our fundamental understanding of our destiny as human beings. In specifically Christian terms, we exist because God creates us, brings us into existence to share in his own divine life. The eternal happiness of being with God, face to face for all eternity, cannot be properly understood in terms of various psychological states of our finite ego. That is, the happiness of eternal life does not consist of merely feeling happy. Rather, eternal happiness is to be understood in terms of the mystery of grace, in which God shares with us his own divine life.

The mystical traditions of the Christian faith have their basis in the mysterious desire, prompted by the Spirit, not to wait until one is dead to begin experientially to enter into the divine union that awaits us in eternity. The whole process of meditation and contemplative prayer embodies the desire to experience, even while in this

earth, the influx of a wholly spiritual, divine realization of God, beyond anything the ego-self can experience or comprehend. And so, for example, with respect to our emotions, it can be said that it is surely a gift to feel God’s presence in our lives, to have a devotional sense of God’s personal love for us. But because these emotions are finite, they are infinitely less than the infinite love of God that God wishes to infuse into our hearts. And so God brings us into a dark night in which we are weaned off our custom-

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Someone who is depressed, on the other hand, feels sad and isolated. He or she may experience a loss of appetite, energy, and the ability to experience pleasure. The depressed person feels her sense of vital-

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ary sense of God’s nearness. The well goes dry. It seems as if God has left us. It is a time for careful discernment, in that this loss of a customary sense of God’s presence may be due to sinful behavior or dissipation on our part. But perhaps our aridity is due to God’s weaning us off our customary reliance on finite, ego-based ways of experiencing his presence, so that we might become open and empty enough to receive the influx of a wholly spiritual realization of God’s giving us his very life as our own life, our own deepest self.

ity is compromised. The two states, depression and dark night, may be similar in some respects, and someone who is prone to depression may have some depressive symptoms activated as he passes through the dark night experience. But the task of the psychologically savvy spiritual director or the spiritually savvy clinician is to recognize the important differences between a psychological impairment and the process of spiritual purification.

**GWM:** We’re almost out of time and space here, but before

we stop—and by way of summary—how does contemplative prayer help the process of Christian spiritual formation?

**JF:** I think contemplative prayer helps the process of spiritual formation by grounding the entire process of awakening to God, already perfectly present, already perfectly given to us in life itself. In contemplative prayer we seek to discover at deeper and deeper levels of awareness that everything we could possibly attain from God—that God himself—has already been given by God in Christ. All is being given in the ongoing, moment-by-moment mystery of creation itself, in which God is giving himself to us in and as the miracle of our very existence as persons. Contemplative prayer is a way of opening ourselves to the intimate experience Jesus spoke of in proclaiming that the coming of the Kingdom has already occurred: the kingdom of God is within us.

## Guidelines for Christian Meditation<sup>1</sup>

### Recommendation

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| Body     | Sit still, sit straight, close your eyes or lower them toward the ground, breathe slowly and naturally, place your hands in a natural or meaningful position in your lap. Allow your bodily stillness to embody your heart's desire to realize your eternal oneness with God. Be simply present in a "Here I am, Lord" (1 Samuel 3:4) stance of openness to God.   |
| Mind     | Be present, open and awake, neither clinging to nor rejecting anything. In meditation, the goal is neither to think our thoughts nor try to have any thoughts. Rather the goal is to sit still and straight, meditatively aware of each thought as it arises, endures, and passes away. In meditation we are not seeking to have thoughts of God, but to know God "in his naked existence" (p. 27).  |
| Attitude | Maintain nonjudgmental compassion toward yourself as you experience yourself clinging to and rejecting everything, and nonjudgmental compassion toward others in their powerlessness. God made our hearts in such a way that only God will do. Or we might say infinite love made our hearts in such a way that only an infinite union with infinite love will do (p. 28). The prevailing attitude of meditation is to have nonjudgmental compassion for yourself as you discover yourself clinging to and rejecting everything (p. 31). |

### Practical considerations (p. 34)

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| How Often? | The value of meditating every day—two times a day is better.                               |
| How Long?  | Meditate for 20 to 30 minutes.<br><br>May be good to use a timer.                          |
| Place?     | Decide where you will practice.<br><br>May want to set up some type of altar.              |
| Routine?   | Have a routine for beginning—sit and settle, bow in reverence, use of prayer or Scripture. |

<sup>1</sup> Finley, James, *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004.