

The Path of Life: Brother Lawrence and Blaise Pascal

Let me begin with a question. I want to list some people and have you think about what all these people have in common. They may have several things in common, but there is one thing I am thinking about in particular. Here is the list: Blaise Pascal, Francis Turretin, Anne Bradstreet, the New England poet Rembrandt, Samuel Rutherford, Richard Baxter, and Jeremy Taylor. What do all of those people have in common?

In this lesson we are going to talk about Blaise Pascal. This is lesson 21. Anne Bradstreet is from lesson 19. Francis Turretin is from lesson 20, and Rembrandt is from lesson 17. Samuel Rutherford came up twice in lesson 16 and in lecture 18 as well. Richard Baxter is from lesson 15. Jeremy Taylor is from lesson 14. So these people cover quite a few lessons here, but all of these people are from the seventeenth century. They were all born and they all died in the seventeenth century. I wanted to make that point, as we have been going on and on with different topics, just to remind us that we are staying in basically the same time in history. We are going to make some movement pretty soon into the eighteenth century, but this is another lesson in the seventeenth century. All of these people lived at the same time, and if you were to make a timeline, it would reflect this. All these people lived in the seventeenth century. They were all born near the beginning of the seventeenth century—Samuel Rutherford first in the year 1600, and Pascal and Turretin, interestingly, in the year 1623.

This lesson is going to focus on the Roman Catholic Church. We have not looked at the Roman Church in some time, because we have focused on other topics in this post-Reformation period. There is so much we could look at and talk about in Roman Catholic history. It is a little overwhelming, but I have chosen to focus on two men, Roman Catholics, who lived in Paris at the same time. One was a very simple man who had a very simple message and lived a very simple life. The other was one of the most brilliant minds in all of human history. One was Brother Lawrence, and the other was Blaise Pascal.

Brother Lawrence was born in 1610 and lived to a ripe old age of 81, dying in 1691. Pascal was born in 1623 and had a very short life, dying at 39 years of age in the year 1662. As we think about Roman Catholic history in the seventeenth century, focusing on these two important people, I would like to just mention one other important matter related to seventeenth-century church history. I want to remind us of what was going on beyond Europe. Half a world away from Paris, Hanzhong Cathedral was built in the 1660s, 150 miles from Shanghai. This was a Roman Catholic cathedral in China, which is interestingly still in use today. We will come later to look at missionary history. It is not only interesting, but it is also important to realize that, as we focus on these two men living in Paris, the Christian message in the Roman Catholic tradition had already reached China.

There are two prayers I would like to use in this lesson. I am going to begin with the prayer from Brother Lawrence, and we will end with Blaise Pascal. One of Brother Lawrence's most frequent sayings was this: "Pray to Him for me, as I pray to Him for you. I hope to see Him quickly." He would say that to friends he would meet over and over again. The one burden of Brother Lawrence's life is expressed in this prayer that we will use now as we begin to study Brother Lawrence and Blaise Pascal. Let us pray.

"O my God, since Thou art with me, and I must now, in obedience to Thy commands, apply my mind to these outward things, I beseech Thee to grant me the grace to continue in Thy presence; and to this end do Thou prosper me with Thy assistance. Receive all my works, and possess all my affections. Amen."

The seventeenth century, especially in France, was a time of the flowering of Roman Catholic piety. There is a quotation from a book that summarizes this nicely. It says, “Never was there such a multitude of theologians, casuists, contemplatives and spiritual masters, opening by voice or by mind, by flesh or by spirit, so many windows towards heaven.” There are quite a few that we could look at. We could look at Francis de Sales, who died in 1622. He was the Catholic bishop of Geneva. It was through the work of Francis de Sales, the author of a book called *Introduction to the Devout Life*, that many people in Geneva who had been converted to Calvinism from Catholicism were now reconverted to Catholicism. They were converted originally from Catholicism to Calvinism, and then back to Catholicism. Or at least their children or grandchildren were. I remember the shock and disappointment that I felt the first time I went to Geneva when I saw a great church and thought, “Well, this is Calvin's Church” and found out it was a Catholic church. Calvin's church was somewhere else. So in the counter-Reformation period, many Protestant territories such as Geneva were reconverted. At least many people in those areas were reconverted to the Catholic faith. Francis de Sales said, “Love alone will shake the walls of Geneva,” so he set out to reconvert Geneva to Catholicism by a light of love.

Saint Vincent de Paul, who died in 1660, was a shepherd whom God spoke to. In his own testimony he tells about this. He then devoted his life to the poor. He was a mystic and an organizer of charitable enterprises. Madame Guyon lived later in the century and then died in the next century, in 1717. She was a woman who was very much characterized by a deep prayer life. She had a very lengthy correspondence with Archbishop Francois Fenelon. Francois Fenelon was the great archbishop of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is a book called *Talking with God* that I am reading now as part of my devotions. It has selections from the lectures and letters of Fenelon. J. I. Packer, in his introduction to that book—he writes introductions to almost all books—talks about the searching gentleness of this archbishop. Madame Guyon, his friend, had great influence on John Wesley and on the German Pietists.

So there are many names there and many topics we could look at. But I want to focus on Brother Lawrence, because to me he is one of the most attractive and impressive of these spiritual guides from Catholic France in the seventeenth century. His name was Nicholas Carmen. He became known as Brother Lawrence later when he joined a monastery. He was a soldier, and he had other jobs. He had kind of an aimless life for a while. He described himself as a big, awkward fellow who broke things. But when he was 50, he entered the Carmelite Order in Paris as a lay brother. He became Brother Lawrence and was put to work in the kitchen. Brother Lawrence's message was a simple one. That is, everything we do, including in the kitchen (which Brother Lawrence really did not care for), we must do it for God, so that the presence of God is as real in the kitchen as it is in prayer and in the chapel. That is really the message of Brother Lawrence. It can be summarized that simply. He said once to someone, “You keep saying that I am always saying just one thing. And you are right. I am always saying just one thing.” And it was the fact that we must practice the presence of God wherever we are, in whatever we are doing. After his death, a few letters and the record of some conversations with a friend were published together in a little book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Did Brother Lawrence, this Carmelite monk, depend on God's grace or his own good works for his salvation? This is what he said about that: “All possible kinds of mortification, if they were void of the love of God, could not efface a single sin. We ought without anxiety to expect the pardon of our sins from the blood of Jesus Christ, only endeavoring to love Him with all our hearts.” Well, the first sentence is a little puzzling to us, perhaps tainted a bit by Roman Catholic semi-Pelagianism, but in the second sentence Brother Lawrence seems to break free from that and express his confidence in the blood of Jesus as the source for his salvation.

As far as I know, Blaise Pascal never met Brother Lawrence, even though they lived in the same town at the same time. But what would the brilliant Pascal have said about this simple Carmelite lay brother? And we have these words from Pascal, from his famous *Thoughts or Pensees*, not directed at Brother Lawrence as far as I know. But I think this would be the answer from Pascal to a question like that. Pascal wrote, “Do not be surprised at the sight of simple people, who believe without argument”—this is the word of one of the most famous apologists in Christian history—“God inclines their hearts to believe. We shall never believe with a vigorous and unquestioning faith unless God touches our hearts, and we shall believe as soon as He does so.” That sounds like a Calvinist, or an Augustinian. Pascal was a Jansenist, as we will see. Jansenists recovered the teaching of Augustine in a time when in the Catholic Church so much of that was lost. So when we come to Pascal, we are clearly in the presence of a seventeenth-century Roman Catholic who believed in grace—a full Augustinian doctrine of grace.

Who was Pascal, and how did he come to these convictions? When Brother Lawrence was in his early teens, Blaise Pascal was born in France in 1623. And it was not long before his family and then other people recognized he was a brilliant child, and he became a brilliant man, a mathematician and scientist. He did work in geometry, physics, and calculus, which made his name famous to people who study mathematics. We know that he built more than 50 models of a calculating machine, probably the first in history, which became a kind of prototype of the modern computer. And he did a lot of other interesting things as well. It is even said that Blaise Pascal invented the wristwatch, so that people did not have to reach into their pockets and pull out a watch to see what time it was. Pascal was so in earnest to use his time that he did not want to take the time to pull the watch out of his pocket. So he made one to fit on his wrist. Whether he actually did that or not I do not know, but he certainly was a man who thought about how to improve life and how to advance human thought.

During the early part of his life, he was a conventional Catholic, not in any sense denying or rejecting the Catholic faith, but at the same time apparently not taking it all that seriously either. He went through a few years in his life known as the “worldly period,” in which this brilliant young Frenchman was devoted to social life and to moving among the intelligentsia and the wealthy and the glittering life of Paris. That time in his life was not wasted, because as he lived in these circles, he began to observe how people in these circles lived and thought and acted. And he kept all that in his mind. The insights that he gained there played a very important role in the diagnosis of the human condition, particularly as it affected now so-called modern people. The seventeenth century was also the time of Descartes, as we will see in the next lesson. And with Descartes came the rise of skepticism. Not only were people praying to God at this time, but some, soon quite a few, and eventually most people were beginning to question, doubt and then eventually deny God. That is a new phenomenon in human history that we will look at in our next lesson in more detail. Like Esther in the Old Testament, Pascal had come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

But before he could do his work in apologetics, he had to come to the Lord in a more definite and forceful and determined way. That happened in Pascal’s life when he became acquainted with a Jansenist. This was a group of French Catholics drawing their inspiration originally from a Dutch Catholic theologian named Cornelius Jansen, whose greatest contribution was to write a book called *Augustine*. It is said that Jansen read all of Augustine’s writing through 10 times and read all of the anti-Pelagian writings of Augustine through 30 times. And then he wrote his book. We know that a medieval theologian once said in desperation, “If anyone says he has read all of Augustine, he is a liar.” But maybe Jansen did read all of Augustine through all of these times. If he did, that is a life’s work in itself. But his book on Augustine is of great interest and significance because in the Catholic Church, now

largely dominated by Jesuit theologians and an anti-Augustinian attitude toward grace, people began to hear again the authentic message of Augustine. It has been pointed out, and I think it is quite interesting and significant, that this book by Jansen in some ways is best summarized by the five points of Calvinism, which Dutch theologians had produced about 20 years before Jansen wrote his book. Jansen and the Jansenists would always deny vehemently that they were Calvinists. But as soon as they had denied that and started saying what they did believe, they sure sounded like Calvinists. Of course, they wanted to stay in the Catholic Church, and to admit that they were Calvinists would bring a charge of heresy upon them. They were charged with heresy anyway, but it was not as easy for their opponents to do that as it would have been if they could have been identified with Calvinism.

Jansenism became a theological movement, a reforming movement—theological in that it tried to bring the doctrine of grace back into Catholic teaching, and a reforming movement because it tried to insist on greater diligence in the Christian life and concern for the church and for the way people lived. One of Jansen's supporters was a reformer who tried to put Jansen's ideas into practice, and this man said there has not been a real church in 500 or 600 years, thinking of the Catholic Church in France. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones in one of his lectures speaks of the Jansenists as Calvinistic Methodists before their time. So something of the reform that came to England later through the Wesleys and the Whitefields is represented by the same spirit that motivated the Jansenist in the seventeenth century. It is debated as to whether Pascal was ever a pure and true Jansenist, whether he considered himself a Jansenist or not. But I think it is without debate that he was very much influenced by this movement, and for all practical purposes was part of the Jansenist movement. He became involved with this earnest reform movement, and certainly he became an Augustinian.

There was another step in the spiritual life of Pascal. First was his conversion to Jansenism, and second, something happened to him on the night of November 23, 1654, when he was 31 years old. It is called the "night of fire." Pascal had a profound spiritual experience that night, which lasted for about two hours he tells us, from about 10:30 to 12:30. It dramatically turned his life around, reoriented all his priorities, and set him on the path that he would follow for the rest of his life as a Christian. He did tell people about this experience at the time that it happened, but after he died a servant discovered a record of this event sewn into the lining of his coat. I have quoted in the syllabus about a third of what he wrote: "From about half past 10 in the evening until about half past 12..." and then he wrote the word fire in large letters. And then he wrote, "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars." And you can read the other words that he wrote. Something happened to him. One might describe it as a time of spiritual struggle and victory, perhaps. As he stayed awake that night thinking about all kinds of things, he said it suddenly came to him that the work that he was to do was to set forth the Christian message as he understood it in the Bible, and not as the philosophers and intellectuals were presenting it. Actually, Pascal said, from that point on he had a much more difficult task. Compared with apologetics, mathematics, calculus, and geometry—all these things are simple. Now he was dealing with something that was going to tax him to the utmost, and through God's grace he did produce some wonderful writings that have helped Christians down to the present.

The whole life of Pascal was a life of sickness and suffering. He died when he was only 39. Sometime before, he had composed a prayer asking God to use illness to a good end. And that prayer begins with these words: "Lord, whose spirit is so good and so gentle in all things, and who art so compassionate that not only all prosperity but even afflictions that come to Thine elect are the results of Thy compassion. Grant me grace that I may not do as the pagans do in the condition to which Thy justice reduced me. Grant that as a true Christian I may recognize Thee as my father and as my God in whatever estate I find myself, since the change in my condition brings no change in Thine own." He

went on to pray and to write a very long prayer that we will come back to at the end of the lesson. As Pascal was dying in the year 1662 at the age of 39 in a room in Paris where he could look out his window and see people walking on the streets below, he thought how sad it is that the poor people do not have carriages, they do not have ways to get about the city. They had to walk on foot, carrying burdens. And as he died, he conceived of and designed a system of public transportation for the city of Paris, which was then put into effect after his death. And then those poor people, who probably never heard of Blaise Pascal, by paying a small amount, were able to ride on a public transportation system.

But before he died, he wrote two important books, and that is why I am giving a lesson on Pascal today. If he had not written these books we probably would not have remembered him as such an interesting man. He wrote the brilliant *Provincial Letters* to answer Jesuit attacks on Jansenism, the two extremes I suppose. People in France would have believed in this time that there were the Jansenists on one side, who sounded very much like Calvinists, and the Jesuits on the other side, who sounded much more like Pelagius, or certainly semi-Pelagianism was their teaching. With biting sarcasm and devastating wit, Pascal wrote *Provincial Letters* to expose the semi-Pelagian views of the Jesuits and their questionable ethics. But by far the greater book is the *Pensees*, or the *Thoughts*. We really cannot say that Pascal wrote that book, because he left 900 fragments, sometimes two or three pages, sometimes a sentence, sometimes just a word or two, on bits of paper in a box. And when he died, people found all these fragments, or thoughts, and the task that editors of the *Pensees* have had from that day down to the present is to try to put those together, like a jigsaw puzzle, in some sort of way that would represent the apologetical approach to Christianity that Pascal held and would have written about if he had lived longer to produce that book. Peter Kreeft in *Christianity for Modern Pagans* puts it this way: “In 1662 God in His infinite mercy struck Pascal dead at the tender age of 39, before he could complete the greatest book of Christian apologetics ever written.” Well it is a very true sentence, and it strikes us with how strange that really is: that God would have done that, that God has His own purpose and plan in everything, including taking this man before he could finish a work that would have been outstanding and of great use in the Christian church. But what he left behind is of great significance and great use as well.

Let me talk for a moment about Pascal’s audience, and then I will come to the message in the *Pensees*. In his thoughts, Pascal really attempted to reach comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. Before this time in church history, we have seen plenty of hypocrites, heretics, and assorted scoundrels of all kinds, but there was something new in the seventeenth century—a new person on the horizon, a person that we could call the modern pagan—and it was this person whom Pascal was particularly addressing. The rise of the modern pagan came about for a lot of reasons, but there were two Frenchmen whose works contributed to this new skepticism. One was Montaigne, and the other Descartes.

Montaigne lived in the sixteenth century. Like Pascal, he was a very brilliant man. In fact, his parents taught him Latin as his first language, and then he learned the other European languages as other languages. But he was at home in Latin. And he went to college when he was six-years-old and spent a life of scholarship and writing. He is famous for his *Essays*. Perhaps you have read some of Montaigne’s *Essays* in college or university or sometime in your studies. In fact, it is thought that he invented the essay. He was the person who first came up with the idea of writing something that we could call an essay. He was a committed Roman Catholic, but what came through in his writings was not his Catholicism but his skepticism. His motto was “what do I know?” And he stressed the folly of certitude in matters essentially uncertain. The question mark is what is going to live on after Montaigne. He introduced the question mark into thinking minds of people in Europe who were used to the period or the exclamation point of the Protestant scholastics and theologians of the earlier period.

Montaigne died before Pascal was born, but Descartes lived at the same time that Pascal did. Descartes changed Montaigne's "what do I know?" into a more famous statement: "I think, therefore I am." And he might have added, "I doubt, therefore I am." And it is from Descartes, as we will see in the next lesson, that we get that hard, questioning frame of mind. Not that Descartes wanted to reject Christianity, but he wanted to start all over again, and from his own mind, questioning everything to come up with God and the external world. He does end up with God; he does not become an atheist, but to find God through your own human processes of thinking is not the same thing as finding God in the Bible. And I expect when Pascal in his night of fire wrote "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not of the philosophers and not of the intellectuals and not of the scholars," he was thinking of Descartes.

Well, what is the message of the *Pensees*? Unfortunately, my time is up, so I cannot tell you, because I do not know. And yet I can recommend three books that help us a great deal in trying to sort out these 900 fragments. The best commentaries I have seen on the *Pensees* are *Three Outsiders* by Allen, *Making Sense of it All* by Morris, and *Christianity for Modern Pagans* by Kreeft. Those books are described in the syllabus. And I have also given quotations on the *Pensees* in a kind of outline in the syllabus. As hints or suggestions as to what Pascal is really up to, let me say this, just to get you started in thinking along this line. Pascal does not begin his apology with something like, "there is a God" or "the Bible is true" or "Jesus Christ is the Son of God." But he would have started, I think, with a simple and undeniable fact: we are unhappy. That is how he starts. That is what he wants to say to modern people. He talks about man's condition as being one of inconstancy, boredom, and anxiety. And when he has made that point, he makes another point, and that is that we are all going to die. It is hard to argue with these starting points in Pascal.

After that he moves from that beginning point to the common solution that human beings have devised in order to avoid really looking seriously at those points. One is diversion, just keeping busy doing things like traveling, playing sports, and reading books—doing anything to avoid thinking. That is the way modern people try to escape the seriousness of the problem.

The second way of escape is through indifference. We cannot know anyway. Nobody really knows, so we do not have to decide. Well, Pascal says you do have to decide. He talks about passionate truth-seeking. There are only two classes of persons who can be called reasonable: those who serve God with all their heart because they know Him, and those who seek Him with all their heart because they do not know Him. I think of all the writers in the history of Christian theology and apologetics, Pascal is the most helpful in distinguishing between what we do with our hearts and what we do with reason. You can read quotations from the *Pensees* on reason, including the famous wager. Number 387 is called the "wager" in a nutshell: "I should be much more afraid of being mistaken and then finding out that Christianity is true than of being mistaken in believing it to be true." I remember when my son was in French class in a college in South Carolina. He had a professor, I fine young teacher, in French, and they read some of Pascal. This man, who was not a Christian and was in fact quite an outspoken non-Christian, said many times in that class, "I am scared to death of this wager. What happens if I wake up someday and find out that there really is a God?" The wager of Pascal had gotten into his mind, and he could not get it out.

The hiddenness of God is another theme that Pascal deals with. If God is really God, then why is He so hard to find? And why is there so much unbelief, and why is it so easy not to believe? Well you want to read Pascal to get an answer to that, because it is a brilliant answer. And finally, as a Jansenist, he comes to the grace of God and then to the Christian life. Let me read the last of the thoughts that I included in

the syllabus, number 553: “Do small things as if they were great, because of the majesty of Christ, who does them in us and lives our life, and do great things as if they were small and easy, because of His almighty power.” To hear somebody say amen to the first part of that, “do small things as if they were great,” well that was Brother Lawrence, who was washing the dishes in his monastery. He did the small things as if they were great.

Let me end with the conclusion of Pascal’s prayer asking God to use illness to a good end. In the last eight years that I have struggled with cancer, this prayer has been a very important prayer in my life, and I would like to end this lesson with it. Let us pray.

“O Lord, let me not henceforth desire health or life, except to spend them for You, with You, and in You. You alone know what is good for me; do, therefore, what seems best to you. Give to me, or take from me; conform my will to Yours; and grant that, with humble and perfect submission, and in holy confidence, I may receive the orders of Your eternal providence and may equally adore all that comes to me from You, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

I will now address a few questions that people often ask. First, did the Jansenists come to the Scriptures directly, or was Augustine their great teacher? I think I would say they really got it from Augustine, but by getting it from Augustine they got all the Scripture. Because Augustine—on the predestination of the saints, on perseverance, and on his other great semi-Pelagian writings—really just constantly exegeted Scripture. So the way into it was Augustine, and what they found there was Scripture.

What were the grounds for heresy against the Jansenists? This becomes a very complicated history because what the Jansenists kept saying was that they were saying what Augustine said. And Augustine was not a heretic in the Catholic Church; in fact, he was a hero. But by this time Augustine was honored more than he was followed in his teaching. So teachings like irresistible grace and limited atonement and election based purely on the sovereign choice of God, that either Augustine explicitly teaches or that can be derived from his teaching, were viewed as heretical teachings, even though the Jansenists could constantly quote Augustine on these points. I think if I could summarize the charge of heresy that the church brought against the Jansenists, it was really “you sound too much like the Calvinists.” And the Jansenists constantly denied, as I said earlier, that they were Calvinists, but when they got back to saying what they did believe, it did sound a lot like the Calvinists.

Finally, what was behind the skepticism? In the next lesson I am going to try to look in more detail at the Enlightenment and Romanticism and why we get this massive shift all of a sudden. We are coming next time to the biggest break we have had in this course since the first century. It is not in the sixteenth century between the Catholics and the Protestants; it is in the eighteenth century between the enlightened and the traditionalists in religion. And then there are a number of things that we can say about that. One thing I would say in anticipation of that is that it looked like the religious question would never be solved. After the Reformation splintered the church, we had 150 years of religious wars, and people finally got exhausted with that. And Montaigne was saying, maybe we really cannot know, and because we cannot know, we should not be killing each other because we say that we do know. He makes the point that all the world’s problems are a matter of grammar. By that he means one person says it this way, one person says it that way, just a word or two different, and so we engage in warfare. And by holding this up to levity perhaps, or skepticism, there is a kind of eroding of confidence in what we can know. And when it becomes, then, fashionable and possible to question authority, like the Scripture, the church fathers, and the professors of medieval universities—Thomas Aquinas and all of that—then the ground is cleared for a new beginning. And that is what Descartes did. You have got to forget it all,

he says. It has not solved anything, but it has just added to our problems. So forget it all: Scripture, theology, philosophy, everything. Start with an absolute new beginning, he thought, doubt everything, and then see what I can come up with just by thinking it out. Well, he came up with something, Cartesianism, which is with us all the way down to the present. And people were ready to hear something like that, but we will see next lesson how that worked out.