

The Practice of the Presence of God Study Guide

**The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother
Lawrence**

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Plot Summary

This collection of conversations and letters of Brother Lawrence, born Nicholas Herman, describe his daily habits in developing his relationship with an almighty being, God. Lawrence describes his spiritual journey from the time of his conversion, at eighteen, to just days before his death. He admonishes any person interested in an authentic religious experience to seek God continuously. If one does this, one attains a consistent relationship with God. Attitudes such as selfless love and attention to detail evidence such a relationship.

Brother Lawrence sees God as his father, his friend, his judge, and his king, among other things. Each of these personifications of God arises at different points of Lawrence's life and spiritual journey. Contrary to spiritual advisors of his time, Lawrence advises devotees to seek God continually and simply, not using repetitive prayers at assigned times only. Secular activities sometimes distract one from one's desired devotion, but years of constant applications and confessions eventually bring one to a place of living in the presence of God.

In his letters, Brother Lawrence writes to other members of clergy, advising them and describing for them his daily habits that lead to his personal relationship with God. However, one realizes that Lawrence intends this prescription for people of any lifestyle, not just clergy. To prove this point, he includes instructions to a young soldier, who Lawrence advises to seek God for safety. He also admonishes the young soldier to keep his love for people below his love for God.

Brother Lawrence lives his life in humility, imploring those to whom he writes never to share his letters. He feels that his level of spiritual attainment lies in waiting for anyone who shows a proper life of devotion in all things.

Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

Brother Lawrence, the writer of the letters in this volume, was born Nicholas Herman in 1610, in France. In his youth, he receives education both at home and in the church. He fights in the Thirty Year's War, where he receives an injury that results in a lifetime of chronic pain. Shortly after his conversion experience, he lives in the wilderness in the manner of church fathers.

In an effort to achieve personal discipline, Lawrence enters the monastery. Surprisingly to himself, he enjoys his simply life there. First, he works as a cook in the monastery in Paris, then, after fifteen years, he moves to sandal repair.

Joseph de Beaufort, who records his own conversations with Brother Lawrence, first publishes Lawrence's work after his death. Beaufort remembers that Lawrence advises him to seek God anytime and anywhere. Lawrence dies in 1691, after enjoying forty years in the presence of God.



Conversations, Introduction- Conversation Four

Conversations, Introduction-Conversation Four Summary and Analysis

In Lawrence's late fifties, Beaufort begins visiting him and recording their conversations. Though Beaufort notices the rough appearance of the older man, he comments on his "gentle grace".

The first conversation occurs on August 3, 1666. Lawrence recalls his conversion, at age eighteen. Upon seeing an autumn tree, he reflects on the tree's eventual rebirth. The fact becomes personal to him and he sees God's purpose for his own life as well. Soon after, he enters the monastery to achieve better self-discipline. Through constant conversation with God, he feels that he enters God's presence. This term, the presence of God, receives much instruction, but never receives definition. One must achieve it to understand what Lawrence means by the presence of God. After entering the presence of God, continually, Lawrence feels real faith.

Lawrence comments further on spiritual matters, citing that, though many men question God's allowance of misery, Lawrence remarks that, only because of God's grace, does man enjoy any joy at all. To achieve God's presence and true joy, a man must control his own passions. In closing, Lawrence tells Beaufort that they may converse again only if Beaufort seeks the wisdom for the purest of reasons.

During their second conversation, Lawrence explains how pure, unselfish love governs all his actions. Once he grasps the love of God, he finds pleasure in any task, no matter how undesirable. Lawrence describes a period where fear of damnation overwhelmed him. Finally, he realizes that love, not need for redemption, drives his actions. Therefore, the fear dissipates. In this manner, he assures Beaufort that, with practice, devotion becomes easier.

Despite his closeness with God, Lawrence expects future pain, because he sees his own unworthiness. Due to this attitude, he feels helpless without God, that he cannot achieve anything worthwhile on his own merit. His practice for achieving his daily walk is to confess his sins and think of them no more. He finds, then, that God always answers his prayers and strengthens him. Lawrence sees God as his only counselor, finding confusion in the counsel of other men.

However, to realize counsel from God, one must always pray, not just at the set prayer times set by the church. Furthermore, one must discipline one's thinking at all times to prevent the mind from wandering during prayers. After all of his devotion, Lawrence finds that no pain equals the joy one receives in the presence of God.



Lawrence mentions faith in the third conversation, stating that faith begins one's spiritual journey. Such trust in God honors the Almighty. Lawrence feels that the worst fate in life, worse than death, is to lose the presence of God. Once again, he states that the counsel of other men proves unhelpful, in that he feels more confused after seeking the aid of others. Lawrence seeks to avoid those things that often distract others, namely money and ritual.

This journey of spiritual fulfillment does not occur in one step, according to Lawrence. He states that one's purpose in life is to praise, adore, and love God. One finds that God never fails, though one may fail to properly recognize God. Once one recognizes God's holiness, one realizes that God's ability, not man's actions, provide for man's sanctification, or spiritual cleansing.

To achieve the presence of God in sanctity, one needs a constant attitude of prayer, Lawrence repeats. However, when such an attitude exists, and actions occur out of love, no action appears small before God. The concepts of faith, hope, and charity occur next. Lawrence advises that the presence of God occurs more readily when one achieves all three attributes.

To maintain the presence of God, one must practice regular self-evaluation. When one sees one's own ungodliness, one bears suffering gladly, knowing God allows it to occur. Lawrence, personally, spends time seeking God, even early in his time at the monastery. Only necessary work interrupts his time of prayer.

At this time, Lawrence recognizes God as his father. He takes time to offer thanks for instances of obedience and confession for times of disobedience. Beaufort sees Lawrence as the best examples that such a lifestyle pays off. Even under stress, Lawrence appears peaceful, as many of his coworkers attest.



Letters, 1-5

Letters, 1-5 Summary and Analysis

Lawrence begins his first letter by imploring the recipient to destroy the contents, so no one else ever reads them. Apparently, this person fails to honor his wishes. He advises the recipient to live only for God. Lawrence views himself as a criminal, one who breaks the law of God. Lawrence sees God in many different perspectives. In this letter, he sees God as his judge.

A life on continual prayer and an awareness of God's omnipresence hinders sin in Lawrence's life. He defines sin as anything contrary to God's plan for his life. He learns this plan with much prayer and contemplation. He ends the letter with thanks to God for blessing his life.

In the opening of letter two, Lawrence says many spiritual advisors describe a Christian's life as a movement from service to God out of fear of punishment to a life of hope for a better future and ending with actions motivated by love alone. Lawrence however, begins his life in the love motivation phase, and sees this as a key to his happiness and success. For a time, he shares, he felt hindered by a sense of impending doom, brought on the feelings of anxiety about life after death. Finally, however, he decides that a negative outcome does not lessen his faith in and love for God. Therefore, he begins to serve even more passionately. Such a revelation fills his life with a renewed sense of peace.

In every aspect of life, Lawrence seeks to please God. He vows never to do the slightest chore without a feeling of God's blessing on that chore. He rejects the routines and scripted prayers of the church, sharing that he spends those times and more in devotion. He sees God as a King, a merciful and benevolent ruler. Lawrence views himself as a wretched beggar in God's kingdom. This extended metaphor continues for several paragraphs.

Other metaphors Lawrence uses in this letter include a babe nursing and a stone. Furthermore, he personifies the soul as a person whom the owner must retrain to appreciate a life of devotion. He closes the letter with a supplication for response for the recipient, seemingly a different recipient than letter one.



Letters, 6-9

Letters, 6-9 Summary and Analysis

Letter six begins in a conversational way, as Brother Lawrence thanks the recipient for some items received. He quickly moves into the subject at hand and encourages the recipient to strive for the presence of God even in old age. For himself, Brother Lawrence vows that he cannot imagine a life apart from the presence of God. For him, the presence exists nearly as a tangible thing. To achieve this lifestyle, a man must willingly deprive himself on occasion, though not violently or out of habit. However, times of fasting or abstinence causes a man to rely upon God in new and extended ways. It also can "express our love". Brother Lawrence ends by asking for prayers.

The author's note tells the reader that, at the age of eighty, Brother Lawrence addresses this letter to a younger man of sixty-four. He admonishes the man about the importance of praying in all things. He tells the man that one must pray for needs as well as with thanksgiving for suffering. Despite one's desperate needs, however, God remains close by. Furthermore, man can commune with God anywhere, not only in church. Lawrence describes that "We may make a chapel out of our heart". Because of the shortness of life remaining for both men, Lawrence points out the greater need for communion with God. Lastly, he admonishes the man to continue with his personal disciplines, not slacking as one's inclination might be. In closing, Lawrence promises to pray for the man.

No new advice remains under the sun, Lawrence assures the recipient of letter eight. One only needs to continue to discipline one's mind. This skill never fully develops, but needs attention for one's whole life. Honest confession to God aids in the development of a disciplined mind. One needs focus in times of devotion and prayer, but keeping a reign of one's mind all the time helps one attain the necessary discipline during prayer. The letter closes with desires to pray for done another.

Finally, letter nine begins with a supplication from Brother Lawrence for the recipient to help a fellow sister, who desires to achieve holiness faster than is appropriate. However, he then admonishes the recipient not to waste time that he could use for serving the Lord. Lawrence closes by saying that to love God, a man must first know God by spending much time in meditation on God.



Letters, 10-15

Letters, 10-15 Summary and Analysis

Letter ten begins with an explanation of reluctance on Lawrence's part to write. He advises the recipient to counsel a friend who has suffered a substantial loss, the apparent death of a friend. If one maintains a proper and reverential attitude toward God, God presents himself as a new and better friend. God remains with a Christian through good times or bad, in times of devotion and recreation. Being continually aware of God's presence is the Christian's job, or "employment", as Lawrence puts it. Lawrence closes with promises to pray for his friend.

Next, Lawrence writes to an ill friend. He opens, surprisingly, by promises not to pray for the friend's healing, but that he may gain God's comfort through the pain. Lawrence promises that any amount of suffering is exactly what God thinks the person needs and can handle. When a Christian realizes that God offers suffering only to grow a person's character, the Christian can receive comfort that an unbeliever cannot understand. In fact, Lawrence feels God's presence more keenly during a time of strife than during a time of comfortable living. As for medical treatment, Lawrence reminds the recipient that medicine only works if God permits it. Lawrence assures his friend that he speaks not out of hypocrisy, but envy. He assures the friend that times of struggle assure one of God's presences in a man's life. Lawrence closes with his assurance that, one day, they will both see God bodily, in the afterlife.

Letter twelve goes to the same person who received the previous letter. Lawrence reminds his friend to trust God in times of trial, apparently a physical ailment. Lawrence promises to pray personally for the struggling friend. He again points out that God often sends trials to draw a believer closer to himself. Lawrence claims joy in his lack of suffering. He feels that he deserves much more judgment from the Almighty, yet he enjoys peace and blessings. However, Lawrence affirms that he would take his friend's pain if possible; however, he knows that he could not bear it, as evidenced by the fact that God did not trust Lawrence with such struggles.

Once again, Lawrence writes to his ailing friend in letter thirteen. He reminds his friend that suffering serves as proof of God's love. He advises his friend that perhaps something remains in his life for which he fails to trust God, and this unknown attitude may be the reason for his suffering. Any requests concerning the pain should only come from a love for God, not a desire to ease one's own spirit. Lawrence acknowledges that such prayers go against human nature, but they offer peace to the supplicator.

In a final letter to his suffering friend, Lawrence rejoices in some healing in the matter, though the illness remains. Lawrence offers, "It is paradise to suffer and be with Him". He reminds the reader that a man must guard his thoughts continually to avoid thoughts that would displease God. He promises his friend that God always answers, in His own time.



The final letter of the collection bears a date just a few days before Brother Lawrence's passing. He maintains his belief that all circumstances in one's life exists at God's allowance and for the sufferer's good. When one sees God's hand in his direst circumstances, the believer receives a great degree of comfort. However, Lawrence reminds once again that one must not seek God only for what he can gain, but for the pleasure of God himself. Lawrence admonishes the reader to give God sole possession of one's heart. Lawrence closes with a hope to see God within days, foretelling his own death.



Characters

Brother Lawrence

This collection includes conversations with and letters from Brother Lawrence. Born Nicholas Herman in 1610, Brother Lawrence begins his adult life in the army. He finally joins a new monastery in Paris, hoping to gain some self-control and coordination.

Brother Lawrence finds fulfillment in his religious life. He begins a daily habit of conversing with God, more than just during their daily prayer times. Others soon notice his unusual calm throughout life. He writes to friends about his tactics, though he pleads with them to share the letters with no one.

Though a belief not common in his time and in his sect, Brother Lawrence believes one should talk to God as a counselor, and one should converse with God continually. Brother Lawrence claims that his very action, no matter how small, stems from his deep love for God.

In the monastery, Brother Lawrence works first as the cook, then the sandal repairman. However, he gains notoriety for his mannerisms outside of his work. The proof of his unique religious experience speaks for itself and causes others to seek out the man's advice. He offers simply advice, repeatedly admonishing his readers to seek God's presence through self-denial and unselfish living.

Lawrence lives a simple and humble life. He refuses attention and often shows his reluctance to offer advice.

God

To Brother Lawrence, God exists as nearly a bodily presence. He speaks of God's presence as a force that he can sense. From the reaction of those around him, it seems that some peculiar presence catches the attention of others as well. Brother Lawrence sees God in a variety of ways, such as father, judge, friend, companion, ruler, and employer. At different times and under varying circumstances, Brother Lawrence refers to the different personalities of God. To Brother Lawrence, none of the personalities contradicts the others and each offers a different lesson. For instance, God as King shows Lawrence his inequality to the almighty. Yet, he describes the relationship in that God the King allows Lawrence, a criminal and servant, to dine at the same table. Such an outlook greatly humbles Lawrence on a daily basis.

Lawrence describes his journey to God as a continual trial. He offers that a life of simply rote prayers will not attain the closeness he feels. Instead, one must seek God in every activity, no matter how trivial. When a man acts in this way, God draws near, but it requires the first act on man's part.



Joseph de Beaufort

The conversations that open this volume occur between Beaufort and Lawrence during Lawrence's later years in the monastery. Lawrence begins by saying that he will only continue the conversations if Beaufort's intentions remain pure. He also voices his desire for them to be private, and Beaufort holds off publishing the letters until after Lawrence's death. In these conversations, Lawrence describes his relationship with God, and it sound much like a man's relationship with a friend or mentor. Beaufort offers not opinions in the conversations and little else of himself in this volume.

Mr. Fieubert

In his first conversation with Beaufort, Lawrence describes his first employment by Mr. Fieubert, the king's treasurer. Lawrence proved clumsy in this employment, however. He eventually enters the monastery in hopes of rectifying his clumsy nature.

Unknown Receptient

As was the custom of the time, none of Lawrence's letters include the name of the recipient. Some begin with an initial, some without even that detail. Some of the recipients are male, some female; often they appear to be fellow clergymen. However, further details about the readers can only be speculated.

Young Soldier

A few letters are addressed to a young soldier. He admonishes the young man not to neglect his spiritual life in times of battle. In fact, Lawrence advises that God's presence may be felt more keenly in times of direst danger.

A Nun

As was mentioned, a few of Lawrence's letters appear to go to an unknown Sister in a nearby abby. Some speculate that she could be a relative of Lawrence's. He apparently writes after she seeks advice from him about his relationship with God. He writes, only if she vows never to share the letters. They are collected and published after Lawrence's death.

Man who is Sixty-Four

At eighty, Lawrence writes to a "younger" man. He offers advice about gaining God's presence and the necessity of self-denial in this endeavor.

Ill Friend

Four letters go to the same reader, a man suffering from an unknown illness. Lawrence advises the man to maintain his relationship with God because of his illness. Such suffering serves as proof of the Almighty's love. Lawrence moves on to admonish the man to examine his own life for something that could hinder his relationship with God, as perhaps the suffering exists for this cause. Finally, Lawrence vows that he would take the man's suffering if possible. However, the lack of such suffering in his own life may mean that Lawrence could not properly bear such a trial.



Objects/Places

Faith

In the beginning, Lawrence struggles with his faith. Even after his conversion experience as a young adult, Lawrence feels some doubt about God's love for him. He fears that in spite of his devotion, he could suffer eternal damnation. However, he finally has a revelation that he should not commune with God only to ensure his soul's eternal destiny, but because God deserves one's devotion, no matter the outcome. After his realization, Lawrence serves God more fervently. He promises never to do an action without God's blessing. The more he explores his faith, the more it grows.

Sanctification

Lawrence seems to struggle at first with this topic. He wonders how God could forgive such a wretched soul as himself. He finds his forgiveness in his daily communion with God.

Mortification

To Lawrence, self-denial plays an important part in one's spiritual life. He believes that one should not seek God for gain, but because God desires the devotion of every man. Lawrence prescribes periods of self-denial and even fasting for the purpose of drawing closer to God. He advises, however, that a man should guard against fasting for its own sake.

Monastery

As a clumsy young man, Lawrence joins a monastery, hoping to gain more discipline in his habits and life. The life there seems to agree with him.

Meditation

Lawrence not only participates in the daily prescribed meditations of the church, but also his own, personal meditations. Such time invested in God serves to make God's presence more real. What's more, he describes a habit of contemplation even during daily activities. He advises his readers to always guard one's thoughts from things that might displease God.



Conversation

Though the first few pieces in the book are called conversations, they exist as Beaufort's recollections of lectures from Lawrence—no participation on Beaufort's part is clearly recorded.

Scripture

Lawrence gives obvious credit to scriptures in his spiritual life. However, it is his prayer time and meditation that he concentrates on. Memorization of scripture even plays a part in his meditation.

Prayer

In explaining the presence of God, prayer exists as the most important component for Lawrence. He talks often of seeking God's direction through long periods of prayer.

Straw

To illustrate his devotion to God, Lawrence vows that he would not pick up a piece of straw without first seeking God's leading on the matter.

Christianity

Christianity forms the bedrock of Brother Lawrence's existence. It, particularly Roman Catholicism, is the religion that underlies all of his advice regarding discipline and spiritual growth.



Themes

The Presence of God

As the title suggests, Lawrence offers his advice for achieving a type of spirituality that he calls the presence of God. When one approaches each event in one's whole life with the will of God in mind, and spends much time in prayer and meditation, the believer begins to sense a very real presence from God. The more a person strives to attain this presence, the more obvious the presence becomes. Lawrence humbly offers that his own habits are relatively simple. He spends time in genuine prayer, not simply repeating the rote prayers offered by the church. Such an idea at this time was quite unusual.

As time passes in Lawrence's letters, his own sense of God's presence deepens. Likewise, he admonishes others to have patience in developing their personal devotional life. Practice and time are the only things sighted to make one feel more in tune with the Almighty.

The result of attaining such a relationship with God offers one peace and security. Lawrence admonishes his friends that even times of trial offer evidence of God's presence, as they occur on for the sufferer's benefit.

Conversion Experiences

Lawrence, early in this volume, shares his own conversion experience. He sees a dead tree and, upon reflecting that it will one day be made new, he feels impressed to convert his own life and dedicate his talents to God. His dedication develops into the devotion that he describes in the conversations and letters. However, Lawrence quickly points out that he does not immediately attain his current level of peace and relationship with God. On the contrary, he struggled for years with his own relationship and value to God.

Lawrence emphasizes conversion in the lives of others. He admonishes the young soldier to seek God in such a dangerous time in his life. He seems to assume conversion experience in the past of the others he addresses.

Lawrence differentiates between his conversion experience, a specific time in his life, and his journey into God's presence. The journey occurs after his conversion, but separate from it. Lawrence feels confident in his conversion, yet recognizes that one can deepen one's relationship with God, just as he can with his fellow man.

Humility

Lawrence's example only serves the believer if one lives a life of abject humility. Though he never uses the term directly, Lawrence describes various habits that serve to define his idea of humility. He advises a lack of personal ambition. Instead, he counsels his



reader to seek the will of God, even if that leads one into a life of little personal attention. He also suggests habits of self-denial and fasting, showing that one can forgo one's own wants to seek the will of God.

In Lawrence's life, he never seeks a job of notoriety. Though he admits that his duties in the monastery fail to bring excitement, he continues in them for the glory of God. He claims that he never even picks up a piece of straw from the ground without first seeking God's will. Therefore, one assumes he never attempts to fulfill his own desires above those of anyone else.

Lawrence feels blessed just to live, even to suffer for God. He feels humble that such a noble God communes personally with him. He shows his humility by repeatedly seeking anonymity in his advice. In fact, he often asks that his letters be destroyed, to avoid undue personal attention.

Style

Perspective

The conversations portion of this book is in third person, as Beaufort describes Lawrence's response. It may surprise the reader that a section labeled conversations fails to include question and answer portions.

The letters, however, are in first person, mostly. In one letter, however, Lawrence refers to himself in third person.

Tone

The tone of the piece remains formal throughout. Even in the most personal of letters, Lawrence maintains a sophisticated and detached voice. This tone serves to emphasize the gravity of the topic discussed.

Structure

The book is in two parts. The first part consists of four conversations between Brother Lawrence and Joseph de Beaufort. Part two contains fifteen letters from Brother Lawrence's personal correspondence. All was published after his death, as he insisted on total privacy during his lifetime. The volume is sixty-one pages long.



Quotes

"I had kindled in him such a love for God that he could not tell whether his love has increased in the more than forty years that he has lived since his conversion." p. 8

"We should feed and nourish our should with high conceptions of God — which will yield in us great joy in being devoted to Him." p. 9

"For he knows very well, that as he can do nothing of himself, God will not fail to give him the strength to bear any future trials." p. 12

"He told me that the greatest pains or pleasures of this world cannot be compared with the spiritual pains and pleasures that he has experienced." p. 15

"He realized that many people do not advance in the surrendered Christian life because they stick to penances and particular spiritual exercises." p. 18

"Rather, sanctification depends up on doing for God's sake what we commonly do for our own sake." p. 20

"God does not regard the greatness of the work, but only the love with which it is performed." p. 21

"Thereafter, I began to live as if there were no one else in the world but He and I." p. 26

"I am so completely resigned to this that I would not pick up a piece of straw from the ground against His wishes." p. 31

"We must, nevertheless, always work at it. Not to advance in the spiritual life is to go back." p. 38

"I know that in order to practice it correctly, the heart must be empty of all other things." p. 39

"You need not cry out very loud. He is nearer to us that we are generally aware." p. 43



"To be with God, it is not necessary to always be at church. We may make a chapel out of our heart." p. 43

"If Mr. ___ uses the loss he has had to his advantage and if he puts all his confidence in God, He will soon give him another friend — a more powerful friend and one more inclined to serve him." p. 49

"Why then should God be neglected? So do not forget Him, but think about Him often. Adore Him continually. Live and die with Him." p. 49

"I do not pray that you may be delivered from your pains. However, I do pray earnestly to God that He will give you strength and patience to bear them as long as He pleases." p. 51

"My weakness is so great that if He left me alone for even one moment I would be the most wretched man alive." p. 55

"God knows best what is necessary for us, and all that He does is for our good." p. 60

Topics for Discussion

How might Brother Lawrence's life have been different without his conversion experience?

Why was Brother Lawrence so unknown in his own time?

Brother Lawrence's beliefs differed from those of his church. How might this affect his life?

Compare and contrast Brother Lawrence's beliefs with your own.

What can a person with different religious beliefs gain from reading this book?

Do Brother Lawrence's ideas for devotion work in today's society?

What questions would you have for Brother Lawrence? How do you think he might respond?

Could Brother Lawrence achieve his devotion outside of the monastery?