

EXPERIENCE JESUS. REALLY.

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JON EL REE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



NELSON
BOOKS

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Experience Jesus—really

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☒ *ith love and gratitude to my fellowship of*
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Contents

1. Help by belief!	1
2. What children and mystics know	10
3. Divine Shelter	20
4. The Refuge of God	20
5. The Turning of the Earth	20
6. The Myth of Neutrality versus the Consecrated Life	20
7. Taking Refuge in the Truth	20
8. The Feastplate of Patrick	20
9. Lions, Cobras, Scorpions	20
10. Love as Refuge	100
11. Jesus—The Integrating Center of All Things	100
12. Reintegration—The Healing of Fragmented Parts	100
13. The Flood and the River	100
14. Fire and Glory	100
15. The Breath of God	100
16. Morning and Evening Prayer	100
17. What Can I Expect?	200
18. Only You, and What You're Doing	200
Appendix 1—The Prayer of Descent	200
Appendix 2—More Robust Daily Prayer	200
Appendix 3—More Robust Bedtime Prayer	201

CONTENTS

Appendix Who I Am in Christ by Neil Anderson	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Notes	v
About the Author	vi

The devil fears a soul in union with
God as he fears God himself.

SAINTE JOHN OF THE CROSS

□.

Help My Unbelief!

Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

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Faith has always been a fragile thing in the human heart. Precious, lifesaving, but fragile, in the way a coral reef is fragile, or a fawn in the woods. It is something to be *protected*.

Your faith is the key that opens the door to access Jesus, and having found him, you gain access to his help *and* the riches of his entire Kingdom! Without that key we are adrift on a gray, endless sea. This is why faith is your most valuable possession, worth more than all the wealth you could possibly accumulate.

But do you really think much about protecting your faith?

I marvel at how something so powerful could at the same time be so fragile, so easily shaken. But I suppose love is like that too—it can be undercut with a single devastating sentence from someone you trusted. My concern is that our faculty of faith—the ability to

trust and believe—has been secretly eroded by something most of us are completely unaware of. It has to do with the fact that we are, all of us, Disciples of the Internet.

If that seems unfair, if you repel the idea that you might be a Disciple of the Internet, consider this: You are a disciple of the system that tutors you, where you turn on a daily basis for guidance on living. For most people, that makes them Disciples of the Internet, even if they call themselves disciples of Christ. If you have a question, you go look it up—new developments for children with ADHD; how often normal married couples have sex; memory care for aging parents; the proper temperature to bake a potato. We do this all day, every day.

However, I'm not referring to whatever content it is you search for online. I'm talking about what we have learned from years of *the process itself*.

For one thing, the Internet has disciplined your soul to expect immediate answers. You inquire and you are answered—immediately. Three million results in 0.003 seconds; there is no waiting. The saints of ages past would be aghast at that. Waiting was considered formational for the soul. They planted crops in the spring and harvested in the fall; there was no rushing things. If you wanted something from the market, you walked there and then you walked back, moving at a pace of about three miles an hour.

But now, when you turn to Jesus and you are not answered in the way the Internet answers, you feel he isn't listening or that you can't hear from him. You sadly believe the two of you are distant from one another, because your soul has been *programmed* for immediate responses. The notion of *lingering* before God doesn't fit with the pace we've come to expect.

That's one example, but the effects of Internet discipleship go far, far deeper.

Weary, Skeptical Pragmatism

To live just about anywhere on the planet is to have access to the entire base of human knowledge in a few clicks. (Our spiritual forebears would have been *aghast* at that too; they would have seen it as a seductive, malevolent trap for the soul. In fact, they probably would have concluded that The End had indeed come.)ⁱ So much information is available to us, on every conceivable subject, that we haven't noticed what it's done to us.

Someone forwards a video featuring a “leading neuroscientist” on the importance of vitamin B12 (“Everyone should be taking B12 for energy and mental health!”). We read a notable economist telling us that bonds are the safest place for our savings right now. We watch a TikTok video showing the correct way to exercise or lose weight. *Okay, we got this; we can thrive.*

But the very next day, everything we thought was reliable is overturned by new information.

Another expert steps forward to inform us, “Your anxiety might actually be *caused* by the amount of B12 you are taking; those levels are neurotoxic.” “Bonds are a terrible decision right now.” “The way you are exercising is damaging your body. Your weight-loss program has actually programmed your cells to *retain* weight.” The leading cancer centers recommend you wear a hat and sunscreen to prevent skin cancer. Oops . . . new research shows that Americans now have a vitamin D *deficiency* because they wear hats and sunblock.

i. In 1982, the philosopher Buckminster Fuller observed the effect of accelerating change on human knowledge. In his model, all human knowledge—from architectural techniques to agriculture to animal husbandry—could be represented as a single unit in AD 1. From that time, it took 1,500 years for all knowledge to double. Then it doubled again in 250 years. Then again in 150. Depending on which Google strategist you read, human knowledge is now doubling in years or even months.

On and on, ad infinitum.

We cling to the belief that practical information is the way to salvation. But information is continually contradicted, undermined, laid waste—leaving us feeling fragile, vulnerable, and cynical. It's like we've been caught within some sort of ancient Eastern quandary parable:

A woman whose child was dying came before the gods to seek their help.

“Please save my child,” she prayed.

The gods responded by putting three boxes before her.

“In one of these boxes is the cure to save your child's life.”

“The second will release famine in the land. The third will bring a curse on someone you do not know.”

“Choose as best you can, or choose not to choose at all.”

Information feels like our salvation, but information is seductive and capricious, friends; it offers refuge, then takes it away the very next moment.

Life with the Internet has severely eroded our confidence that we can even know what's true *while accelerating the drive to get to the truth*. Like a gambling addiction. We want to thrive; we want our loved ones to thrive. We're convinced that in order to thrive, we must find the right information, “the latest science.” But that information keeps changing, the truths we hold today overturned by new information tomorrow.

This whiplash has made skeptics of us all—weary skeptics.

The cinnamon you use has lead in it. This renowned car company is found guilty of installing illegal devices to bypass emissions tests on their vehicles. Russian hackers generate fake news

to influence global elections. That photo you loved that a friend posted? It was fake, AI generated.

Do you see what I mean, folks?

The Internet has eroded your capacity to *believe* through constant contradiction and exposures of deceit. We lose confidence in our capacity to *trust*; our faculty of faith collapses into suspicion.

How confident are you right now that you can get to the real news—the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? How confident are you that your financial future is being well guarded by the folks in charge of guarding it? How confident are you that your government is telling you the truth?

Long-term suspicion can lead to what one paper called “active, sophisticated attributional thinking,” meaning we begin to infer ulterior motives in others that may not in fact be there, but that nevertheless diminish our ability to believe.¹ (Think politics—how “the other guys” are always up to no good.) The Internet has disciplined us into weary, skeptical pragmatists.

You would think we could keep this limited to exercise and politics, but it has bled into our ability to access God.

Can We Really Experience Jesus?

The Internet has taught its disciples that there shall be no mystery to anything. We can get to the bottom of any question, lay open the bare facts to any secret. In fact, if there *is* mystery, we’ve been thoroughly disciplined to question it. Mystery equals some probable deception or scandal. Facts are safe; nothing else is.

The eradication of mystery would also be shocking to our spiritual forebears. We feel that in order to experience Jesus and access

his help, we need to understand the spiritual like we do nutrition, exercise, or retirement plans. A friend asked me this week, “Yes, but how do I love God? How do I take refuge in him? I mean, *practically* speaking?”

It is the question of the person disciplined by the Internet.

As soon as you hear the demand for the practical, in simple, clear immediate steps, you know you are talking to a Disciple of the Internet. It is a very different question, a different posture than someone approaching a saint of ages past and asking, “Teach me to commune with God.”

If I told you, “The Bible says that prayer is powerful,” you would say, “Sure.” If I told you, “I saw this study on how prayer rewired the brains of older nuns into a more peaceful frame of mind,” you would say, “Wow. That is so cool. I think I want to pray more.”

It’s madness, this addiction. My friend was asking *how* in the same way he would ask, “How do I change the water filter in my refrigerator?” His question (I know him well) was filled with demand for the mechanics, as in, *Make God like my refrigerator—not mysterious, but concrete*. Give me the practical. Make it practical. Give me the latest science or I won’t believe you; in fact, I hardly believe you now.

Do you understand that to make Jesus and his Kingdom practical is to strip it of all wonder, mystery, and *power*?

It’s like asking for the mechanics of falling in love, enjoying sunlight on the ocean, comforting a frightened child. It’s like refusing to trust laughter until someone explains the neuroscience. Honestly, asking, “How do I love God?” is like asking, “How do I love my son, my daughter?” The heart knows how to love without being told the latest research, for heaven’s sake.

This is the bind we’ve been disciplined into—our weary, skeptical

pragmatism keeps us from experiencing the God we are dying without.

And there is a way out.

Thank God, there is a way out of the madness and into the joys of daily, rich experiences of Jesus. God and his beautiful Kingdom are much more accessible than your cultural moment has conditioned you to believe and *experience*.

This is very, very good news.

The Fresh Air of the Mystics

There is a tradition within Christendom that can help us out of the terrible bind we're in as Disciples of the Internet (not to mention every other fatiguing thing this age has done to us). A beautiful, historic fellowship within the Christian story of men and women called (by others) Christian mystics. I'm guessing you might recognize names like Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Brother Lawrence, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross.ⁱⁱ

Many of the desert fathers and mothers would have been called mystics. So, too, would most of the Irish monks (men and women) that spread across that once-wild island seeking hermitages in the wilderness, which spread into little monastic communities and then leapt across the sea and evangelized Europe.

Once upon a time, the label “mystic” was intended as a term of respect or reverence, as in “saint” or, better still, “true follower of Jesus who has regular experiences with God.”

ii. Yes, Aquinas and Luther. See Robert Barron, *Thomas Aquinas, Spiritual Master* (Word on Fire Academic, 2022), 1; Bengt Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (Augsburg, 1976), 190.

EXPERIENCE JESUS. REALLY.

But for us, living in the ashes of the Enlightenment, the word “mystic” has been hijacked to mean either “someone slightly crazy and out of touch with reality” or someone practicing a sort of pagan spirituality. There are oddballs, of course, in every movement. But as soon as we read the Christian mystics’ writings and learn something of their lives, we discover that they were actually ordinary men and women who were *the most in touch with reality*; they experienced Jesus and the beauty of his Kingdom.

Bishops and cardinals came to the humble Carmelite friar Brother Lawrence for counsel and discipleship because this simple man had such a sweet communion with Jesus. He wrote,

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.²

There was nothing strange or heretical about it; Brother Lawrence was a normal Christian. As Chesterton explained,

Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity. The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has permitted the twilight. He has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland.³

Chesterton, a devout Christian, meant by “fairyland” the world of wonder and mystery children accept as real, and which Christians understand to be the beautiful unseen realm, the rest of the Kingdom of God. One foot on earth and one in the realm the Scriptures call “the heavens,” which is no less real.

Friends—we need daily encounters with Jesus; that is what we are after. Nothing else will address the human condition. The apostle Paul did not come to Christ because someone showed him the latest research. He had an undeniable, personal encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, which not only transformed his faith but the future of Christianity. Paul went on to have many encounters with Jesus, which would make him one of the early mystics. And when the apostle John—also a mystic in the truest sense of the word—wrote to his disciples about the true nature of life with Christ, he said this:

**WE NEED DAILY
ENCOUNTERS
WITH JESUS;
THAT IS WHAT
WE ARE AFTER.**

From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in—we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we're telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us.

We saw it, we heard it, and now we're telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Our motive for writing is simply this: We want you to enjoy this, too. (1 John 1:1–4 THE MESSAGE)

Biblical Christianity was always, *always* meant to be deeply experiential. There are thousands of Muslims coming to faith in Christ right now through actual encounters with Jesus in dreams and visions.⁴ These undeniable encounters secure their faith against the immediate persecution they often experience.

Tragically, too many Christians have lost the experience of God

in this hour, due in no small part to their discipleship to the Internet and everything else this age has done to the human soul. Recovering the daily experience of Jesus is indispensable to recovering and securing faith in this hour. So let me quote Brother Lawrence again: “There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God; those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it.”

Now, I realize I’m taking an enormous risk talking about “mystics.” But there are times when great risks must be taken, and this crisis we are in certainly qualifies. We will unpack the word “mystic” and its embodiment in the pages to come. If you limit yourself to things you already understand and experience, there won’t be much reason to read a book, travel, read the news, or walk in the woods, will there? Thankfully, these humble, holy men and women generously wrote about their experiences and invited others to experience Jesus and his Kingdom as the normal Christian life. In truth, the “mystical” element of our forefathers and mothers is much, much broader than we’ve been led to believe.

I have interacted with thousands of men and women around the globe whom I would call “ordinary mystics”: normal folks living out their lives in normal occupations but saturated with a rich sense of God’s presence and daily experiences with Jesus. Many have become dear friends. I want to invite you to recover this life. It is, as the apostle John pointed out, the one God always intended you to have.

And it will prove an absolute rescue to your faith.

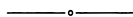
PAUSE

Weary Disciple of the Internet, your soul has also been conditioned to take in massive amounts of content every day—far beyond the soul’s ability to absorb. You think it’s normal, but it is not.

Precious truths are washed away every hour by waves of incoming content. It’s like pouring water into a glass already filled with good wine; it dilutes and dilutes while it spills over the sides and onto the floor.

So pause.

Take a few deep breaths.



We are going to take a soul’s pace through this book.

Reflect before you move on. I said some pretty important things in chapter 1. It should have stopped you in your tracks.

Linger with it a moment.