

Heroes of Faith: Julian of Norwich

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Sin is no shame.

I've been struggling for the past couple of years in my life as a Christian with feelings of guilt and of failure in my walk with God. There was nothing particular dragging me down; I was just discouraged by the idea that Christ calls his followers to be like him, to live pure and holy lives, but that there is no way that I as a fallen human being could fully live up to that calling.

There have been little sources of encouragement and redirection along the way as I've explored this question, and today I'd like to share with you some insights from the woman whose ideas allowed me to finally understand my sinfulness in a way that still allows me to stand justified before my Savior. Her name is Lady Julian of Norwich.

Let me begin by saying that I will only be focusing on a small part of Lady Julian's full and rich, albeit often a little unconventional, theological insights. Her writings contain fascinating thoughts on the wholeness of the Trinity and the worldwide problem of evil, so I encourage each and every one of you to go do your own Julian research... but today I'll just be focusing on the part that impacted me most: her reflections on God's grace and forgiveness.

First, a little history: Lady Julian lived in Norwich, England, in the late 1300s. She was an incredibly humble and optimistic woman, and spent most of her life as an anchoress, living alone in a room attached to a church, dedicated to solitude and prayer. It's hard for me to imagine this type of lifestyle; seldom interacting with others, spending every minute of every day reflecting on and praying to God, and this total dedication makes me admire her all the more. Her optimism is the other thing that inspires me about her. She lived in a time of war and persecution, yet her writing is full of the joy and hope she finds

in reflecting on her savior. This made her a unique character for her time, and she was frequently visited by believers looking for advice. Her influence has lasted for centuries, carried on by her writing about the revelations she experienced during a nearly fatal illness, impacting thousands of people like she impacted me.

Around the age of 30, Lady Julian became seriously ill and experienced 15 revelations, or “showings” from God, which included images, words relayed directly to her mind, and insights so deep that she had trouble putting them into words. Now, in our culture, claiming to have visions sent from God would probably lead to some time in a mental health institution. We are very skeptical about supernatural occurrences. But in Julian’s culture, when people were spending their whole lives committed to prayer and solitude, these things were not so unheard of. Living a quiet and reflective lifestyle focused on Christ, she was free from all the distraction and busyness which keeps us so preoccupied today. Her entire life was centered on God, so I believe that the revelations she experienced were valid, and I hope that you too can accept the insights she shares with faith that they are of God.

Julian’s first vision was a reenactment of Christ’s crucifixion, which moved her **“not to fear or guilt, but rather reassurance.”** This establishes the theological paradox which drives Julian’s ministry: “our good Lord, who is so holy and so much to be feared, is at the same instant so homely and courteous.” I love the words that she chooses. They’ve been translated in several different ways, sometimes as “friendly,” “familiar,” or “gracious.” Her point is that Christ has an informal, relational side. The great being who created all people and all things, who has complete control and knowledge of all that happens in the universe, intimately knows and cares for each of his children. This is arguably the most important concept to her, as she both starts and ends her writing with a strong emphasis on it. In the final pages, she voices what she imagines to be God’s frustration with our inability to grasp both sides of the paradox: “...love is nearest to us all. And this is the knowledge of which we are most ignorant; for many men and women

believe that God is almighty and has power to do everything, and that he is all wisdom and knows how to do everything, but that he is all love and is willing to do everything—there they stop. And this ignorance is what hinders those who most love God; for when they begin to hate sin, and to mend their ways... there still remains some fear which moves them to think of themselves and their previous sins. And they take this fear for humility, but it is foul ignorance and weakness. ... for **it comes from the Enemy**, and it is **contrary to Truth**. ... It is God's wish that we should place most reliance on **liking** and **love**; for it makes God's power and wisdom very gentle to us; just as through his generosity God forgives our sins when we repent, so he wants us to forget our sins and all our depression and all our doubtful fear." Any fear or despair that disquiets, distresses, or disturbs us is doubtful fear, which comes from doubt of God's goodness, and is of the evil one. Only reverent fear, which brings us peace and comfort, is from God. God always wants us to be secure and confident of his love.

One of Julian's favorite things to talk about is God's love for us. Yet you may noticed she doesn't only use the word love, she also uses the word "liking." This struck me. It's not just the required family love, you know, like how you "love" your cousins even though they're kind of mean and annoying.... No, God also **likes** you. He wants to spend time with you. He wants to know you. He loves to watch you interact with people. He delights in you. Julian says "we are God's joy, his reward, his glory, his crown." It is out of this deep love that Christ sacrificed his life, and out of this great liking that God forgives his children. Julian was told in her visions: "the sin of Adam was the greatest sin that has been done, or ever shall be, until the end of the world." If Adam's sin, the greatest sin, was righted and made good by Christ's death and resurrection, then "so shall every lesser one." You think your sin is a big deal? Adam and Eve gave up the perfect life of walking with God in the Garden of Eden to eat a piece of fruit! They trusted a snake! They ruined it for all of us! Yet God has redeemed even their sin.

All throughout the Bible, God uses the lowliest persons-- the sinful, the selfish-- to carry out His will. Julian brings up the examples of King David, the disciples Peter, Paul & Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and we know from our own reading and Sunday School stories that there are countless others, especially throughout the Old Testament. These individuals committed sins against people and against God, yet they are memorable characters because God used them despite their fallenness. Julian encourages us that we will be forgiven just as these Biblical heroes were forgiven, saying: “it is **no shame** to them that they have sinned... for in heaven the badge of **their sin is changed into glory.**”

In her visions, Julian did not see sin itself but rather the effects of sin, which led to her belief that sin is not so much the things we do, but rather “the condition in which we find ourselves in a world infected by evil.” Julian viewed sin as a sickness: the actions which most people speak of as ‘sins’ are not the sickness itself, but the symptoms of this sickness. Therefore **it is not the sinful actions Christians must work to cure, but the underlying state of sinfulness:** heal the disease, not merely the symptoms. These ideas can radically influence the way we as Christians deal with sin. Rather than getting uptight about the things we do wrong, or judging others for sinful actions, we should focus on transforming our lives and our society as a whole, **from the inside out.** We can do this only by **becoming one with Christ.**

Julian speaks throughout her writing of what she calls “one-ing” with Christ. I love this idea. It emphasizes a personal, intentional, intimate relationship with God. Julian continually encourages believers to draw near to God, to “**seek and pray,**” making “ourselves open to God...pliable and submissive to God.” What delights God most, she suggests, is “when we pray simply trusting in his goodness, holding on to him, **relying upon his grace.**” The word “**seek**” comes up in her writing countless times, reminding readers that relationship with God is a conscious and daily pursuit.

A key to this **relationship** is **repentance.** Julian asserts that “**sin is no shame**” because when we are moved to repentance, it makes us humble; it “lowers us in our own sight so that we believe we are only fit to sink into hell.” It is in this state of humbleness that we at last begin to **be like Jesus.** In our suffering we move to repentance, allowing God to purge us and make us new. Therefore **our sin is no shame to us; we are not to**

dwell upon it. We have suffered and been made humble like Christ, and like Christ, God has raised us up for new life in Him. This may happen over and over again; we may become frustrated with the number of times we seem to fall into the same traps of selfishness or worldly desire, but we who love God are dearly loved and treasured by him, and **we are forgiven.** Julian says,

“When one does not love sin, but hates it and loves God, all is well. And those who truly do this, though they may sometimes sin through frailty or inexperience, **do not fall**, for they will strongly rise again and behold God, whom they love with all their might. God has made the world to be loved by him or her who is a sinner, and he always loves us, and always longs to have our love.”

Lady Julian of Norwich was a beautiful example of the humility, dedication and optimism to which Christ calls us. In that spirit, take some time today to be still, to seek and pray, to reflect on the amazing love that grants us forgiveness so that we need not be ashamed.

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