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The Song of Angels

Walter Hilton





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The Song of Angels

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The Song of Angels

BY WALTER HILTON

Dear brother in Christ, I understand by your own speech, and also by the word of another man, that you yearn and long to have more knowledge and understanding than you have of angel's song and heavenly sound--what it is, how it is perceived and felt in the soul, how to be sure that it is true and not feigned, and how it is made by the presence of the good angel and not by the inputting of the evil angel. These things you desire to learn from me, but, truthfully, I cannot tell you with certainty the truth of this matter; nevertheless I will show you something of my opinion in a short word.

Note well that the end and pinnacle of perfection is true union of God and the soul by perfect love. This union is truly made when the powers of the soul are reformed by grace to the dignity and the state of the first condition--that is, when the mind is firmly established, without changing and wandering, in God and spiritual things, and when the reason is cleared from all attention to worldly and fleshly things, and from all bodily images, figures, and fantasies of created things, and is illumined by grace to see God and spiritual things, and when the will and the affection are purified and cleansed from all fleshly, natural, and worldly love and inflamed with burning love of the Holy Spirit. This wonderful union may not be fulfilled perfectly, continuously, and wholly in this life, because of the corruption of the flesh, but only in the bliss of heaven. Nevertheless, the nearer that a soul in this present life may come to this union, the more perfect it is. For the more that it is reformed by grace to the image and the likeness of its Creator here, in this way, the more joy and bliss shall it have in heaven.

Our Lord God is an endless being without changing, almighty without failing, supreme wisdom, light, truth without error or darkness, supreme goodness, love, peace, and sweetness. Therefore the more that a soul is united, fastened, conformed, and joined to our Lord, the more stable and strong it is, the more wise and clear, good and peaceable, loving and virtuous it is, and so it is more perfect. For a soul that has by the grace of Jesus and long, hard work of bodily and spiritual exercise, overcome and destroyed lusts, passions, and unreasonable impulses within itself, and without in the sensuality, and is clothed all in virtues, as in meekness and mildness, in patience and softness, in spiritual strength and righteousness, in continence, in wisdom, in truth, hope and charity--then it is made as perfect as it may be in this life. Much comfort it receives from our Lord, not only inwardly, in its own secret nature, by virtue of the union to our Lord that lies in knowing and loving God, in illumination and spiritual burning from Him, in transforming of the soul into the Godhead; but also many other comforts, savors, sweetnesses, and wonderful feelings in various manners, because

our Lord graciously visits His creatures here on earth, and because the soul profits and grows in charity.

Some souls, by virtue of the love that God gives them, are so cleansed that all creatures and everything they hear, or see, or feel by any of the senses, turns them to comfort and gladness; and the sensuality receives new savor and sweetness in all creatures. And just as previously the sensual appetites were carnal, vain, and corrupt, because of the pain of original sin, so now they are made spiritual and clean, without bitterness and biting of conscience. And this is the goodness of our Lord, that since the soul is punished in the sensuality, and the flesh shares the pain, that afterward the soul be comforted in the sensuality, and the flesh join in joy and comfort with the soul, not carnal, but spiritual, as it was a fellow in tribulation and pain.

This is the freedom and the lordship, the dignity, and the worth that a man has over all creatures, which dignity he may so recover by grace here, that every creature appear to him as it is. And that occurs when by grace he sees, he hears, he feels only God in all creatures. In this way a soul is made spiritual in the sensuality by abundance of love, that is, in the nature of the soul.

Also, our Lord comforts a soul by angel's song. This song cannot be described by any bodily likeness, for it is spiritual, and above all imagination and reason. It may be felt and perceived in a soul, but it may not be showed. Nevertheless, I will speak of it to you as I think.

When a soul is purified by the love of God, illumined by wisdom, and stabilized by the might of God, then the eye of the soul is opened to see spiritual things, as virtues and angels and holy souls, and heavenly things. Then, because it is clean, the soul is able to feel the touching, the speaking of good angels. This touching and speaking is spiritual and not bodily. For when the soul is lifted and ravished out of the sensuality, and out of mind of any earthly things, then in great fervour of love and light (if our Lord deigns) the soul may hear and feel heavenly sound, made by the presence of angels in loving God.

Not that this song of angels is the supreme joy of the soul; but because of the difference between a person's soul in flesh and an angel, due to uncleanness, a soul may not hear it except by ravishing in love, and it must be much purified and well cleaned, and filled with much love, before it will be able to hear heavenly sound. For the supreme and essential joy is in the love of God by Himself and for Himself, and the secondary is in communing with and beholding angels and spiritual creatures. For just as a soul, in understanding spiritual things, is often touched and moved through bodily imagination by the work of angels, as when Ezekiel the prophet saw in bodily imagination the truth of God's hidden mysteries, just so, in the love of God, a soul by the presence of angels is ravished out of mind of all earthly and fleshly things and filled with a heavenly joy, to hear angel's song and heavenly sound, according to the measure of its love.

I think that no soul may truly feel the angel's song or heavenly sound, unless it is in perfect love, though not all that are in perfect love have felt it, but only the soul that is so purified in the fire of love that all earthly savor is burned out of it, and all obstacles between the soul and the cleanness of angels are broken and put away from it. Then truly may he sing a new song, and truly may he hear a blessed heavenly sound, and angel's song, without deceit or feigning. Our Lord knows the soul that, for abundance of burning love, is worthy to hear angel's song.

Whoever would hear angel's song, and not be deceived by feigning of himself, or by imagination, or by the illusion of the enemy, should have perfect love. That is when all vain love and fear, vain joy and sorrow, are cast out of the heart, so that it loves nothing but God, nor fears anything but God, nor joys, nor sorrows in anything but God, or for God. Whoever by the grace of God goes this way will not err.

Nevertheless, some are deceived by their own imagination or by the illusion of the enemy in this matter. Such a person, who may have worked long and hard, bodily and spiritually, in the destroying of sins and gaining of virtues, and perhaps received by grace a little rest, and a clarity in conscience, may soon leave prayers, readings of holy scriptures, meditations on the passion of Christ, and thoughts of his wretchedness. Before he is called by God, he tries, by his own skill and by violence, to seek and to see heavenly things, before his eyes are made spiritual by grace. He overcomes his reason by imagination, and by indiscreet effort turns the brains in his head, and overworks the powers and the wits of the soul and of the body. And then, because of weakness of the brain, he thinks that he hears wonderful sounds and songs. But it is nothing but a fantasy, caused by troubling of the brain, as a person in a frenzy thinks that he hears and sees what no one else does. It is all vanity and a fantasy of the head, or else it is by the work of the wicked enemy that feigns such sounds in his hearing.

For if a person has any presumption in his fantasies and in his workings, and falls by them into indiscreet imagination, as in a frenzy, and is not ordered or ruled by grace, or comforted by spiritual strength, the devil enters in, and by his false illuminations, and by his false sounds, and by his false sweetnesses, he deceives that soul. And of this false ground spring errors, heresies, false prophecies, presumptions, false reasonings, blasphemings, slanderings, and much other mischief. And, therefore, if you see any spiritually-occupied person fall in any of these sins or deceits, or into frenzies, know well that he never heard or felt angel's song or heavenly sound. For, he who truly hears angel's song is made so wise that he will never err by fantasy, or by indiscretion, or by deceptive working of the devil.

Also, some people feel in their hearts what seem to be spiritual sounds and sweet songs in various manners, and this is often good, but sometimes it may turn to deceit. This sound is felt in this way. A person sets the thought of his heart only in the name of Jesus, and firmly holds it there, and in a short time he thinks that that name brings him great

comfort and sweetness, and he thinks that the name sounds delectably in his heart, like a song; and this pleasure is so strong that it draws all the powers of the soul to it. Whoever feels this sound and this sweetness truly in his heart, knows that it is of God, and, as long as he is humble, he shall not be deceived.

But this is not angel's song; it is a song of the soul by virtue of the name and by a touching of the good angel. For when a soul offers himself to Jesus truly and humbly, putting all his trust and his desire in Him, and busily keeping Him in mind, our Lord Jesus, when He will, purges the affection of the soul, and fills it and feeds it with sweetness of Himself, and makes His name feel in the soul as honey, and as song, and as anything that is delectable; so that the soul evermore wants to cry *Jesus, Jesus*. And he has comfort not only in this, but also in psalms and hymns, and anthems of holy Church; the heart sings them sweetly, devoutly, and freely, without any effort of the soul or bitterness, in the music that the holy Church uses.

This is good, and a gift of God, for the substance of this feeling lies in the love of Jesus, which is fed and illuminated by such songs. Nevertheless, in this manner of feeling, a soul may be deceived by pride--not while the affection sings to Jesus, and loves Jesus in sweetness of Him, but afterward, when it ceases and the heart cools down from the love of Jesus. Then pride may enter in.

Also, a man may be deceived in this way: he hears it said that it is good to have Jesus in his mind, or any other good word of God, so he strains his heart mightily to that name, and by habit he has it nearly always in his mind. Nevertheless, he does not feel by it sweetness in his affection or light of knowing in his reason, but only an abstract thought of God, or of Jesus, or of Mary, or of any other good word. Here may be deceit, not that it is evil to have Jesus in mind in this way, but if he holds this feeling and this thought (which is only by his own effort and habit) to be a special visitation of our Lord, he thinks it more than it is.

For note well that an abstract thought or imagination of Jesus, or of any spiritual thing, without sweetness of love in the affection, and without light of knowing in reason, is but a blindness, and a way to deceit, if a man hold it to be more than it is. Therefore I think it safer that he be humble in his own feeling, and not esteem this thought at all, till he may, by habit and use of this thought, feel the fire of love in his affection, and the light of knowing in his reason.

Now, I have told you in this matter a little of what I think, not affirming that this suffices, or that this is the truth of the matter. But if you think otherwise, or if anyone else savor by grace the contrary, I defer to him; it suffices for me to live in truth principally, and not in feeling.

EXPLICIT