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## **JEANNE GUYON: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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## Chapter 1

# A Spiritual Biography

**T**here were omissions of importance in the former narration of my life.<sup>1</sup> I willingly comply with your desire for a more detailed account, though the labor seems rather painful, since I do not have much time for study or reflection. My earnest wish in retelling the events of my life is to paint in true colors the goodness of God to me and the depth of my own ingratitude, but it is impossible, as numberless little circumstances have escaped my memory. You are also unwilling that I should give you a minute account of my sins. I shall, however, try to leave out as few faults as possible. I depend on you to destroy this narrative when your soul has drawn those spiritual advantages that God intended and for which purpose I am willing to sacrifice all things. I am fully persuaded of His purposes toward you for the sanctification of others as well as for your own sanctification.

Let me assure you, this account of my life will not be accomplished, except through pain, weariness, and labor, and it will be reached by a path that will wonderfully disappoint your expectations. Nevertheless, if you are fully convinced that it is on the nothing in man that God establishes His greatest works, you will be in part guarded against disappointment or surprise. He destroys that He might build, for when He is about to rear His sacred temple in us, He first totally razes that vain and pompous edifice that human art and power had erected, and from its horrible ruins a new structure is formed by His power only.

Oh, that you could comprehend the depth of this mystery and learn the secrets of the conduct of God. This conduct is revealed to babes, but it is hidden from the wise and great of this world, who are enveloped in their

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Guyon wrote this autobiography under the tutelage of her spiritual director, Father La Combe, during a time of imprisonment. This first chapter of her life story is addressed to him. She also addresses him directly from time to time in other chapters of the book.

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own works and who think of themselves as the Lord's counselors, capable of investigating His procedures. They suppose they have attained that divine wisdom that is hidden from the eyes of all who live in self. By a lively intellect and elevated faculties, they mount up to heaven and think they can comprehend the height and depth and length and breadth of God. (Compare Ephesians 3:18.) This divine wisdom is unknown, even to those who pass in the world as people of extraordinary illumination and knowledge. To whom then is she known, and who can tell us any tidings concerning her? Destruction and death assure us that they have heard with their ears of her fame and renown. It is, then, in dying to all things and in being truly lost to them, passing forward into God, and existing only in Him, that we attain to some knowledge of the true wisdom. Oh, how little known are her ways and her dealings with her most chosen servants! Scarcely do we discover anything of this, but surprised at the dissimilitude between the truth we thus discover and our former ideas of it, we cry out with Paul, "O the depth of the...wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out" (Rom. 11:33).

The Lord does not judge things as men do, who call good evil and evil good (see Isaiah 5:20) and account as righteousness that which is abominable in His sight and which, according to the prophet, He regards as filthy rags. (See Isaiah 64:6.) He will enter into strict judgment with those who are self-righteous, and they will, like the Pharisees, be subjects of His wrath instead of objects of His love or inheritors of His rewards. Does not Christ Himself assure us that "except [our] righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, [we] shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20)? And which of us even approaches them in righteousness, or, if we live in the practice of virtues, though much inferior to theirs, are we not ten times more ostentatious? Who is not pleased to behold himself righteous in his own eyes and in the eyes of others? Or, who is it that doubts such righteousness is sufficient to please God? Yet, we see the indignation of our Lord manifested against such.

He who was the perfect pattern of tenderness and meekness—such as that which flowed from the depth of the heart, and not that affected meekness that under the form of a dove hides the hawk's heart—appears severe only to these self-righteous people, and He publicly dishonored them. In what strange colors does He represent them while He beholds the poor sinner with mercy, compassion, and love, and declares that for them only He was come, that it was the sick who needed the physician (Matt. 9:12), and that He came only to save the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 15:24).

Oh, Source of Love! You do indeed seem so jealous of the salvation You have purchased, that You do prefer the sinner to the righteous! The

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poor sinner beholds himself vile and wretched; is in a manner constrained to detest himself; and, finding his state so horrible, casts himself in his desperation into the arms of his Savior, plunges into the healing fountain, and comes forth white as wool. (See Isaiah 1:18.) Then, confounded at the review of his disordered state and overflowing with love for Him, who having alone the power had also the compassion to save him, the excess of his love is proportioned to the enormity of his crimes and the fullness of his gratitude to the extent of the debt remitted. The self-righteous man, relying on the many good works he imagines he has performed, seems to hold salvation in his own hand and considers heaven as a just reward for his merits. In the bitterness of his zeal, he exclaims against all sinners, and represents the gates of mercy as barred against them and heaven as a place to which they have no claim. What need have such self-righteous people of a Savior? They are already burdened with the load of their own merits. Oh, how long they bear the flattering load while sinners, divested of everything, fly rapidly on the wings of faith and love into their Savior's arms, who freely bestows on them that which He has so freely promised!

How full of self-love are the self-righteous, and how void of the love of God! They esteem and admire themselves in their works of righteousness, which they suppose to be a fountain of happiness. These works are no sooner exposed to the Sun of Righteousness, than they discover all to be so full of impurity and baseness that it frets them to the heart. Meanwhile, the poor sinner, Magdalene, is pardoned because she loves much, and her faith and love are accepted as righteousness. The inspired Paul, who so well understood these great truths and so fully investigated them, assures us that "the faith of Abraham...was imputed to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:16, 22). This is truly beautiful, for it is certain that all of that holy Patriarch's actions were strictly righteous; however, not seeing them as such and being devoid of the love of them and divested of selfishness, his faith was founded on the coming Christ. He hoped in Him even against hope itself (see Romans 4:18), and this was imputed to him as righteousness, a pure, simple, and genuine righteousness wrought by Christ, and not a righteousness wrought by himself and regarded as of himself.

You may imagine this a digression from the subject, but it leads to it. It shows that God accomplishes His work either in converted sinners, whose past iniquities serve as a counterpoise to their elevation, or in people whose self-righteousness He destroys by totally overthrowing the proud building they had reared on a sandy foundation instead of the Rock—that is, instead of Christ.

The establishment of all these ends, which He proposed in coming into the world, is effected by the apparent overthrow of that very struc-

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ture that in reality He would erect. By means which seem to destroy His church, He establishes it. How strangely does He found the new dispensation and give it His sanction! The Legislator Himself is condemned by the learned and great as a malefactor and dies an ignominious death. Oh, that we fully understood how very opposite our self-righteousness is to the designs of God; it would be a subject for endless humiliation, and we would have an utter distrust in that which at present constitutes the whole of our dependence.

From a just love of His supreme power and a righteous jealousy of men who attribute to each other the gifts He Himself bestows upon them, it pleased Him to take one of the most unworthy of creation to make known the fact that His graces are the effects of His will, not the fruits of our merits. It is the property of His wisdom to destroy what is proudly built and to build what is destroyed, to make use of weak things to confound the mighty (1 Cor. 1:27), and to employ in His service those things which appear vile and contemptible.

This He does in a manner so astonishing as to render them the objects of the scorn and contempt of the world. It is not to draw public approbation upon them that He makes them instrumental in the salvation of others, but it is to render them as the objects of their dislike and the subjects of their insults, as you will see in this life about which you have enjoined upon me to write.