



THE ANÁSTASIS CENTER  
FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION & MINISTRY

# Reconstruction

The Deep Roots of Early Christian Theology

# Reconstruction: Objectives

- Deconstructing Christian faith is common
- Common outcomes: Collapse? Holes?
- Why construct at all?
- Early Christianity helps us discern a strong foundation

# Reconstruction: Objectives

- Identify controversial issues commonly debated in Western Christianity
- Examine early Christian views on the issue
- Identify if, where, and why Christians shifted on the issue
- Recover a framework for approaching the issue in today's context



# Reconstruction

## The Deep Roots of Early Christian Theology

- 4/30 Slavery: How the Early Church Got It Right
- 5/7 Women in the Early Church
- 5/14 The Goodness of God and the Healing of Creation:  
Ministry According to Athanasius of Alexandria
- 5/21 Does God Have a Dark Side? Hell in the Early Church
- 5/28 Scripture: How Authoritative Is It? Why Do We Need It?
- 6/4 Scripture: Is the Bible the Product of Empire? Violence?
- 6/11 Politics, the Church, and Jesus' Restorative Justice
- 6/18 Sexual Ethics and the New Creation
- 6/25 The Person, the Face, and the Climb Up the Mountain:  
Gregory of Nyssa and the Shaping of Desire



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# The Person, the Face, and the Climb Up the Mountain: Gregory of Nyssa and the Vision of Ecstasy

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The Anástasis Center for Christian Education and Ministry

# Outline

- Introduction: The Photographer and the Monks
- The Christian Vision of the Person: Human Being, Human Becoming (20 min)
- Discussion (15 min)
- Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* (25 min)
- Discussion (15 min)
- Protestantism and the Human Being (10 min)
- Q&A

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# The Photographer and the Monks





# The Photographer and the Monks

- “We were walking for a long time in the desert of Athos, toward the “horrible Karoulia” [an isolated desert region on the southernmost shore of Mount Athos, occupied principally by ascetics]. A monk was sitting in his front yard. As we walked by, he lifted his head and said, “You’re the greatest photographer of Athos, and you’ve come to take my picture.” It was the first time we had met. I wasn’t holding anything to indicate that I was a photographer.”
  - **Stratos Kalafatis**
    - Giorgos Milonas, “Inside the ‘Holy Mountain’: Exploring the Unseen World Of Mount Athos,” *Huffington Post*, March 31, 2015

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# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- “If one thinks that Christianity consists solely in doctrinal precision, the Christian mystery becomes a pious fable.”
  - Gregory of Nyssa



# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- (1) An Experience of God

- “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows-- was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”

- Paul, 2 Corinthians 12:2 – 4

- Visions: Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1 & 10; Daniel 2 – 10, Acts 10; Revelation

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires

- <sup>16</sup> But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. <sup>17</sup> So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not... <sup>21</sup> I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good... <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand **I myself** with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with **my flesh** the law of sin.

- Paul, excerpts from *Romans* 7:14 – 25

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires
  - Imitation of, and participation in, Jesus himself
    - ‘He was incensed... [and] wept’ (Jn.11:33 – 35)
    - ‘I have lusted to eat this Passover with you’ (Lk.22:15)
    - ‘For the joy set before him’ (Heb.12:2)
    - Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony*
  - Recovery from trauma?
    - From violence and sexual abuse in the Greco-Roman world
    - From same-sex pedophilia
      - Athanasius of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* 6
      - Basil of Caesarea, *Renunt.*6 and *Sermo asceticus* 323
  - Typologies of desire and development
    - Evagrius of Ponticus: eight types of sins
    - Roman Catholic: seven types of ‘deadly sins’
    - Enneagram: nine types

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

The background image shows the interior of a church. A series of arched windows, constructed from brick, are set into a stone wall. Light streams through these windows, creating a dramatic play of light and shadow. In the foreground, a dark wooden table holds several lit candles, their flames casting a warm, golden glow. The overall atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

“..the desert became the powerhouse of a new culture. [...] The discipline of meditation on the holy text often assumed philological resources that could be found only in upper-class circles, in close proximity to great cities. In the *Life of Antony*, and in successive layers of monastic spiritual guidance, we can detect the emergence of an alternative...

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

“The monk’s own heart was the new book. What required infinitely skilled exegesis and long spiritual experience were the ‘movements of the heart,’ and the strategies and snares that the Devil lay within it. [...] The deepest relief of the soul came now, not from the written pages, but from that tap of the Old Man’s fingers on the disciple’s chest, which assuaged the heart beneath. The shift from a culture of the book to a cultura Dei, based largely on the nonliterate, verbal interchange of a monastic ‘art of thought,’ was rightly hailed as the greatest and the most peculiar achievement of the Old Men of Egypt: it amounted to nothing less than the discovery of a new alphabet of the heart.”

- Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, p.229





Extent of Christianity, c. 300 C.E.  
 Extent of Christianity, 300–600 C.E.  
 Monastic community  
 Expansion of monasticism, 4th–6th centuries C.E.

0 200 400 miles  
 0 200 400 kilometers

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development



- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires
  - “Man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but **man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One.** For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.”
    - Irenaeus of Lyons (130 – 202 AD), *Against Heresies*, 4.38.3

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development



- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires
  - “It cannot then be doubted that **there are by nature some seeds of goodness in every soul implanted by the kindness of the Creator**: but unless these are quickened by the assistance of God, they will not be able to attain to an increase of perfection... And therefore the will always remains free in man, and can either neglect or delight in the grace of God. For the Apostle would not have commanded saying: ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’ had he not known that it could be advanced or neglected by us. But that men might not fancy that they had no need of Divine aid for the work of Salvation, he subjoins: **‘For it is God that works in you both to will and to do, of His good pleasure.’** And therefore he warns Timothy and says: ‘Neglect not the grace of God which is in thee;’ and again: ‘For which cause I exhort thee to stir up the grace of God which is in thee...’”
    - John Cassian (360 – 435 AD), *Conferences* 13.12

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development



- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires

- “Bear in mind, too, that **virtue is a gift from God implanted in our nature, and that He Himself is the source and cause of all good, and without His co-operation and help we cannot will or do any good thing. But we have it in our power either to abide in virtue and follow God, Who calls us into ways of virtue, or to stray from paths of virtue, which is to dwell in wickedness, and to follow the devil who summons but cannot compel us. For wickedness is nothing else than the withdrawal of goodness, just as darkness is nothing else than the withdrawal of light. While then we abide in the natural state we abide in virtue, but when we deviate from the natural state, that is from virtue, we come into an unnatural state and dwell in wickedness.**”

- John of Damascus (675 – 749 AD), *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 2.30

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development



- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires
  - “Freud must be – as it were – turned on his head. It is not that physical ‘sex’ is basic and ‘God’ ephemeral; rather, it is God who is basic, and ‘desire’ the precious clue that ever tugs at the heart, reminding the human soul – however dimly – of its created source. Hence... **desire is more fundamental than ‘sex.’ It is more fundamental, ultimately, because desire is an ontological category belonging primarily to God, and only secondarily to humans as a token of their createdness ‘in the image.’** But in God, ‘desire’ of course signifies no *lack* – as it manifestly does in humans. Rather, it connotes that plenitude of longing love that God has for God’s own creation and for its full and ecstatic participation in the divine, trinitarian, life.”
    - Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.10

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires
  - Humility and Growth in Character
    - “When a man is getting better he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse he understands his own badness less and less....You can understand the nature of drunkenness when you are sober, not when you are drunk. Good people know about both good and evil: bad people do not know about either.”
      - C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* book 3, chapter 4

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires
  - Desiring to 'see God'
    - 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Mt.5:8)
    - Knowing the Father by seeing the Son through the Spirit
  - How to express the experience of God?
    - "Inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak"
    - Important words that can go no further
      - Creed: "The Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds"
      - Canon

# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- (2) Healing and Developing Our Desires
  - Words for God's Character: vital, yet limited
    - Beauty
    - Goodness
    - Love
    - Connection
    - Words mean more to us the more we live them
  - Theology: kataphatic and apophatic
    - God is...
    - God is not...



# The Christian Vision of the Person: Growth and Development

- Human Partnership: Embodiment and Imagination
  - Baptism
  - Eucharist
  - Worship service (1 Cor.11 – 14)
  - Mission (Mt.28:16 – 20)



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# Discussion Questions

1. How do Jesus' desires give shape, grounding, and limits to our desires?
2. How do your desire for beauty, goodness, love, belonging, justice, etc. reflect your desire for Jesus?
3. How does your desire to sin reflect your desire for Jesus?

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# Gregory of Nyssa (335 – 395 AD)

- Younger brother of Basil of Caesarea and Macrina the Younger
- Bishop of Nyssa (372 – 376; 378-395)
- One of the three “Cappadocian fathers” of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 AD)
- Strongest abolitionist voice
- “Father of mysticism”



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Meditation on Christian virtue and perfection
  - Classics of Western Spirituality, 1987
  - Not an exegesis, but a creative redeployment
- Tradition of reflection on Moses' encounter with God
  - Hellenistic Judaism
    - Philo of Alexandria's *Life of Moses* (1<sup>st</sup> cent)
  - Christian
    - Clement of Alexandria's *Life of Moses* (2<sup>nd</sup> cent)
    - Origen of Alexandria's *Homilies on Exodus* (3<sup>rd</sup> cent)
    - Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* (4<sup>th</sup> cent)
    - Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* 9.10 (late 4<sup>th</sup> cent)
    - Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Corpus* (6<sup>th</sup> cent)
    - Anonymous, *Cloud of Unknowing* (14<sup>th</sup> cent)

And Mount Sinai was all in smoke  
Because the Lord descended upon it in fire . . .  
and the Lord called Moses up to the top of the mount.  
And Moses went up.

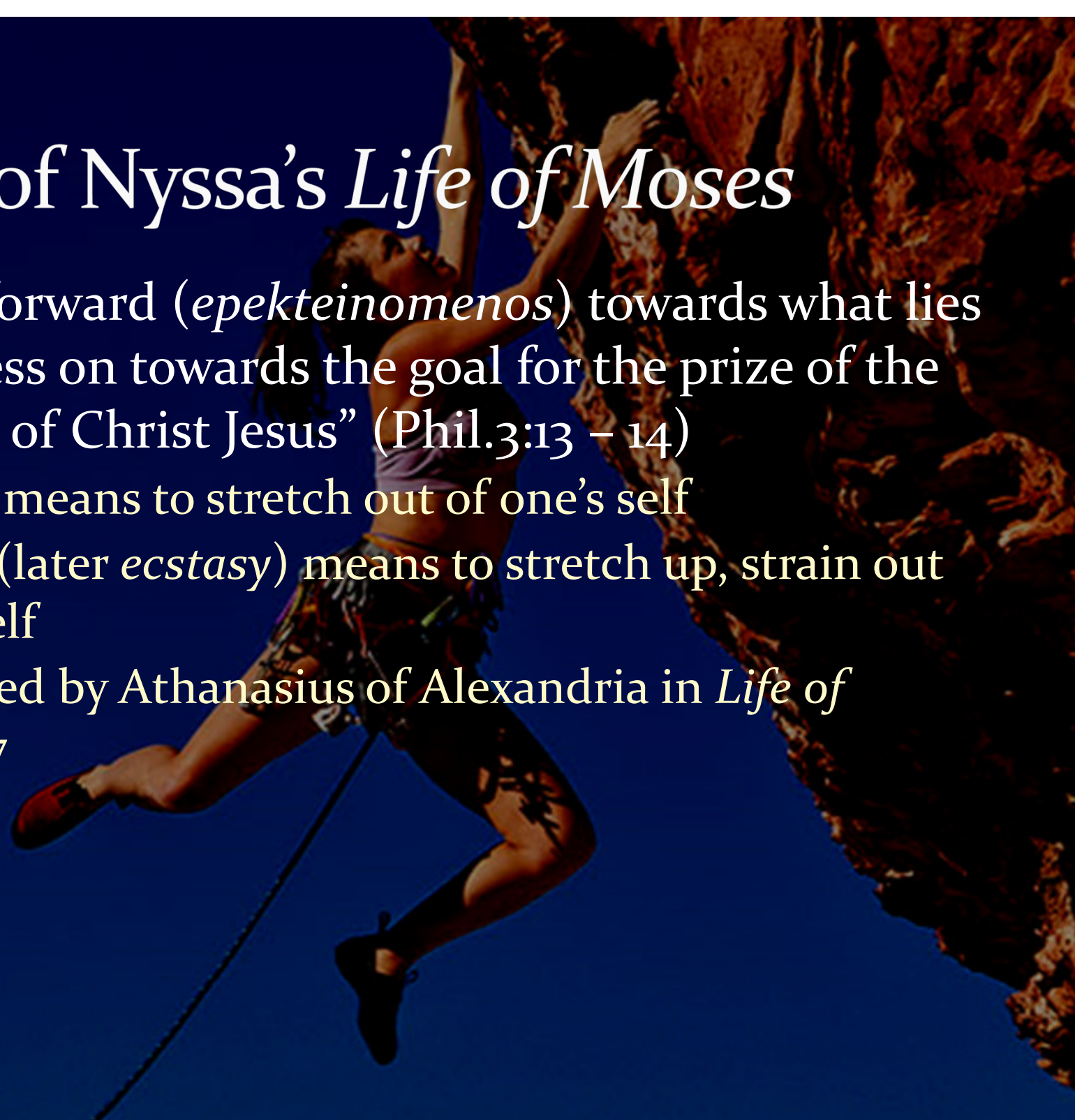
# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- The Mountain: A Biblical Theme
  - Eden (Gen.2:10; Ezk.28:13 – 14)
  - Ararat (Gen.8:3)
  - Abram's altar, between Bethel and Ai (Gen.12:8; 13:3 – 4)
  - Moriah (Gen.22:2; 2 Chr.3:1)
  - Sinai (Ex.3:1 – 6; 18:5; 19:1 – 25; 34:29 – 35)
  - Zion (2 Sam.5:7; 24:15 – 25; 1 Ki.4:29 – 6:38; 8:1 – 66)
    - Songs of Ascent (Ps.120 – 134)
  - Jesus on mountains
    - Mount Tabor, of transfiguration: 'move' (Mt.17:20; cf.17:1 – 13)
    - Mount Zion, the temple: 'into the sea' (Mt.21:18 – 22)
    - Mountain 'in the sea' of the Gentiles (Mt.28:16 – 20; cf.4:8; 15:29 – 39)



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- “Reaching forward (*epekteinomenos*) towards what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of Christ Jesus” (Phil.3:13 – 14)
  - *epekteino* means to stretch out of one's self
  - *epektasis* (later *ecstasy*) means to stretch up, strain out of one's self
  - Also quoted by Athanasius of Alexandria in *Life of Anthony* 7

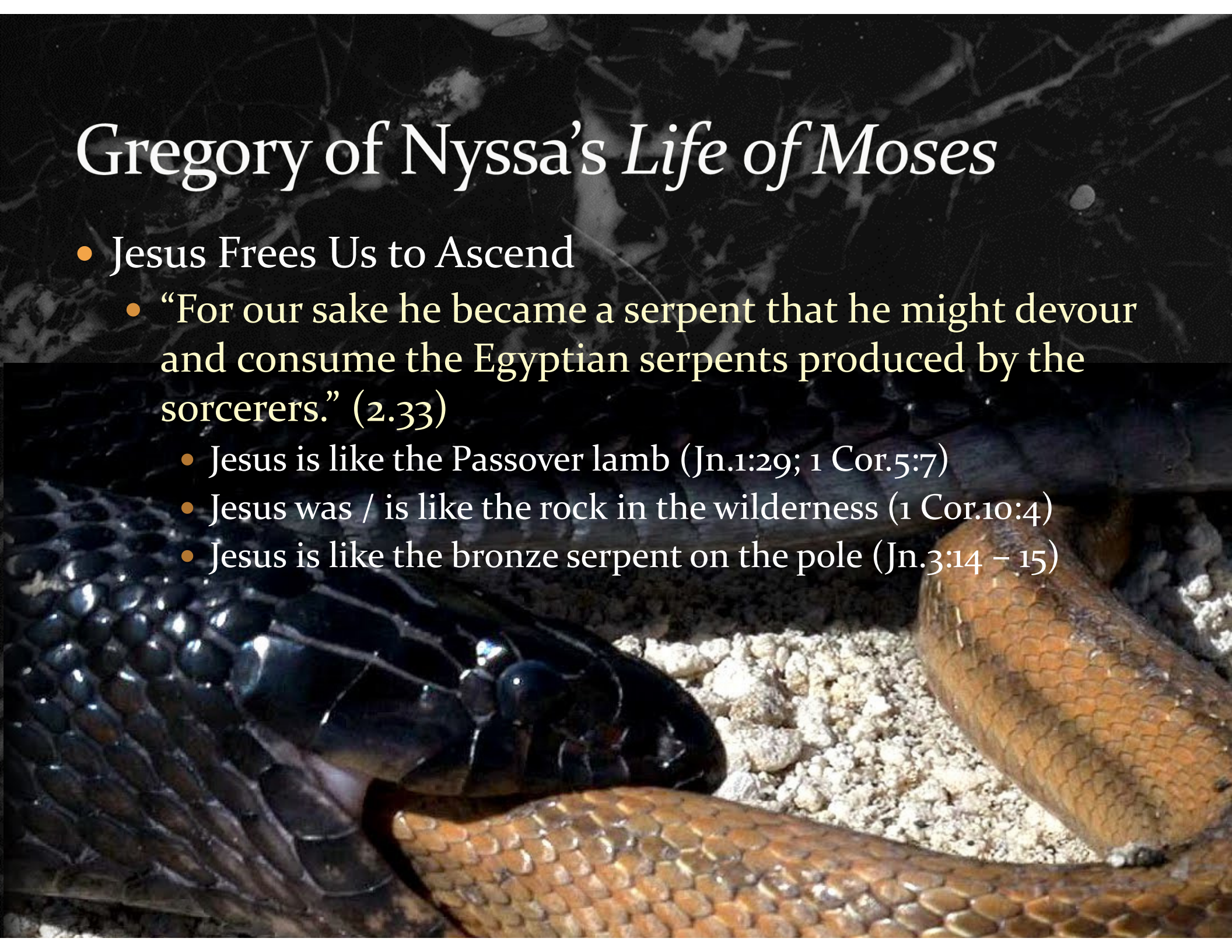


# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- What is Perfection? (*teleiotes*)
  - For physical beings: growing into a proper maturity
  - For human virtue: “that its one limit of perfection is the fact that it has no limit”

# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Jesus Frees Us to Ascend
  - “For our sake he became a serpent that he might devour and consume the Egyptian serpents produced by the sorcerers.” (2.33)
    - Jesus is like the Passover lamb (Jn.1:29; 1 Cor.5:7)
    - Jesus was / is like the rock in the wilderness (1 Cor.10:4)
    - Jesus is like the bronze serpent on the pole (Jn.3:14 – 15)



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Jesus Frees Us to Ascend
  - “If the father of sin is called a serpent by Holy Scripture and what is born of the serpent is certainly a serpent, it follows that sin is synonymous with the one who begot it. But the apostolic word testifies that **the Lord was made into sin for our sake by being invested with our sinful nature**. This figure therefore is rightly applied to the Lord. For if sin is a serpent and the Lord became sin, the logical conclusion should be evident to all: By becoming sin he became also a serpent, which is nothing other than sin. **For our sake he became a serpent that he might devour and consume the Egyptian serpents produced by the sorcerers.**” (2.32 – 33)

# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Our Struggle: To Become
  - “Because man finds himself between these two who have contrary purposes for him, **it is in his power to make the one prevail over the other.** While *the good angel* by rational demonstration shows the benefits of virtue which are seen in hope by those who live aright, *his opponent* shows the material pleasures in which there is no hope of future benefits, but which are present, visible, can be partaken of, and enslave the senses of those who do not exercise their intellect.”  
(2.46)

# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Our Struggle: To Become
  - “If, then, one should withdraw from those who seduce him to evil and by the use of his reason turn to the better, putting evil behind him, it is as if he places his own soul, like a mirror, face to face with the hope of good things, with the result that the images and impressions of virtue, as it is shown to him by God, are imprinted on the purity of his soul. Then his brother brings him assistance and joins him, for the angel, who in a way is a brother to the rational and intellectual part of man’s soul, appears, as I have said, and stands by us whenever we approach the Pharaoh.” (2.47)

# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Our Destination is Desire (Eternal Progress)
  - “Activity directed towards virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion”
  - “What Moses yearned for is satisfied by the very things which leave his desire unsatisfied” (2.235)



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- The Reward for Desiring God is More Desire for God
  - “Every desire for the good constantly expands as one presses on towards the good... this is the vision of God: to see God is to never be satisfied by the desire to see Him” (2.239)





# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- “Seeing” God
  - To move in the same direction as God’s expansion
    - “To follow God wherever he might lead us is to behold God”  
(2.252)



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- “Farther Up and Farther In”
  - “And soon they found themselves all walking together and a great, bright procession it was – up towards mountains higher than you could see in this world even if they were there to be seen. But there was no snow on those mountains: there were forests and green slopes and sweet orchards and flashing waterfalls, one above the other, going up forever. And the land they were walking on grew narrower all the time, with a deep valley on each side: and across that valley the land which was the real England grew nearer and nearer...”



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- “Farther Up and Farther In”
  - “And as he spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventure in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”
    - C.S. Lewis' *The Last Battle*, ch.16

# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- “Seeing” God
  - Heretical (Eunomian?) aspiration to *comprehend* (vs. *apprehend*) the totality of who God is



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- “For he who moves to one side or brings himself to **face** his guide assumes another direction for himself than the one his guide shows him. Therefore, he says to the one who is led, “My **face** is not to be seen,” that is, “Do not **face** your guide.” If he does so, his course will certainly be in the opposite direction, for good does not look good in the **face**, but follows it. What is perceived to be its opposite is **face** to **face** with the good, for what looks virtue in the **face** is evil. But virtue is not perceived in contrast to virtue. Therefore, Moses does not look God in the **face**, but looks at his back; for whoever looks at him **face** to **face** shall not live, as the divine voice testifies, man cannot see the **face** of the Lord and live.” (2.253 – 254)



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Jesus Continues to Heal and Empower Us
  - “...the gnawings of desire are frequently active even in the faithful. Nevertheless, the person who looks to the One lifted up on the wood rejects passion, diluting the poison with the fear of the commandment as with a medicine.”

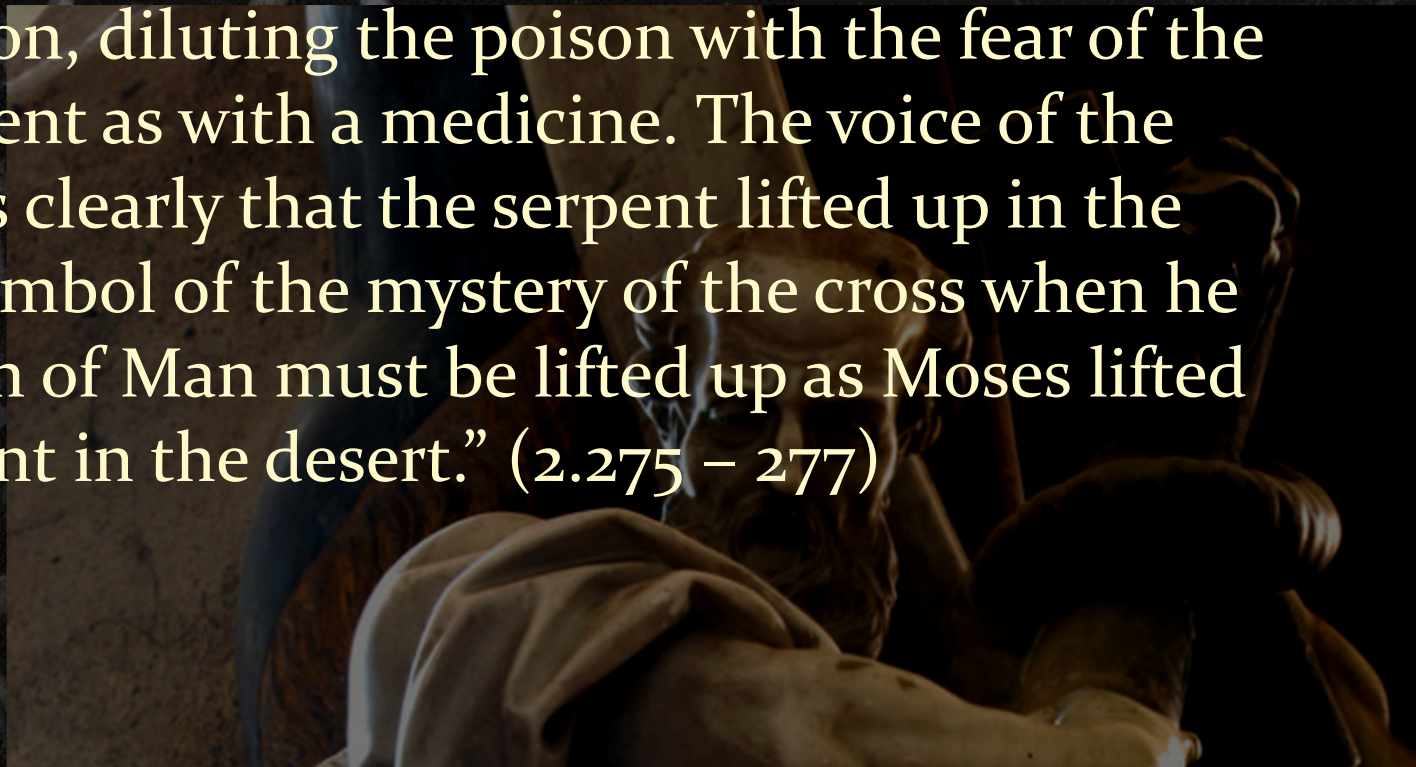


# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Jesus Continues to Heal and Empower Us
  - “Since therefore unruly desires brought forth the deadly serpents from the earth (for every offspring of evil desire is a serpent), the Law prefigures for us what is clear in the wood. This figure is a likeness of a serpent and not a serpent itself, as the great Paul himself says, in the likeness of sinful flesh. Sin is the real serpent, and whoever deserts to sin takes on the nature of the serpent. **Man, then, is freed from sin through him who assumed the form of sin and became like us who had turned into the form of the serpent.** He keeps the bites from causing death, but the beasts themselves are not destroyed. By beasts I mean desires...

# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

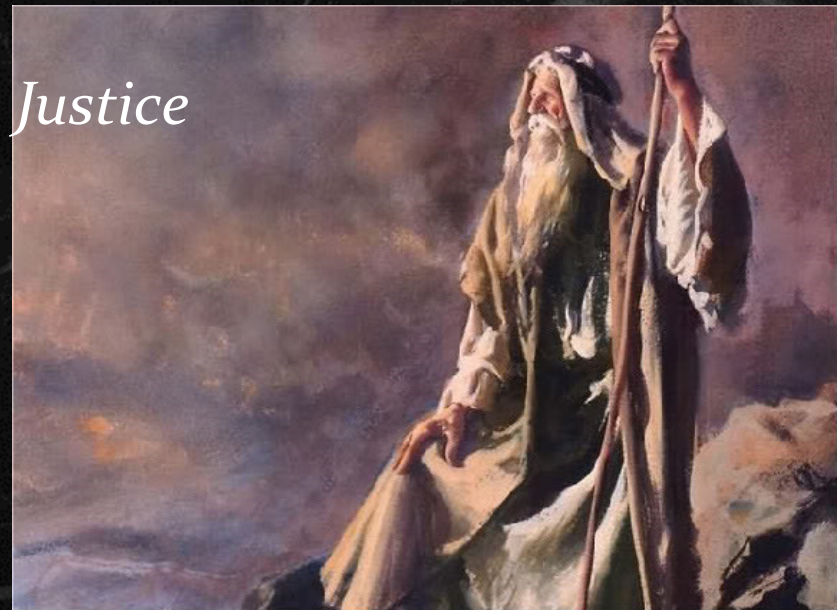
- Jesus Continues to Heal and Empower Us
  - “...the lust of flesh against spirit has not completely ceased to exist. In fact, the gnawings of desire are frequently active even in the faithful. Nevertheless, the person who looks to the One lifted up on the wood rejects passion, diluting the poison with the fear of the commandment as with a medicine. The voice of the Lord teaches clearly that the serpent lifted up in the desert is a symbol of the mystery of the cross when he says, The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert.” (2.275 – 277)





# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Developmental View of the Relational Self
  - *Imago Dei*: We Have a Godly Core Self-in-Relation
    - E.g. Romans 7:14 – 25
      - “I myself” vs. “sin which indwells me”
      - “The good that I want” vs. “the evil I do not want”
    - E.g. Jewish “wisdom” in Proverbs 8
    - Vs. Negative self and desires in Marx, Nietzsche, Freud
    - Shame: Western and Eastern
    - Self and desires in Michael Sandel, *Justice*



# Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*

- Developmental View of the Relational Self
  - *Imitatio Christi: We Must Strengthen True Desires*
    - Negative: Romans 1:21 – 32; Ephesians 4:17 – 24
    - Positive: Romans 6:23; 8:5 – 25; 12:15; Ephesians 4:20 – 24; Philippians 2:13
    - Godward, “upward” and outward
    - Our choices shape our desires
  - *Participatio Christi: Jesus is Our Medical (not Penal) Substitute, Source of Healing*
    - E.g. Romans 8:3 – 4; Hebrews 5:7 – 10
    - Connects “moral exemplar” and “substitutionary atonement”

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# Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about Gregory's presentation of human being, human becoming?
2. What do you think about the role of the 'face'?
3. How is physical fitness a helpful analogy for spiritual fitness? How is climbing mountains a helpful analogy for experiencing God?

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# Protestantism and the Human Being

- The Influence of Augustine (Protestant Reformation)
  - God's grace: competitive with human willing and virtue?
    - “[In the contemplative mode, one] strives towards perfection until, theoretically, one would need less and less grace or perhaps finally no grace at all.”
      - Gerhard O. Forde, “The Lutheran View,” edited by Donald L. Alexander, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, p.24
  - God's Grace = Mercy [?]

# Protestantism and the Human Being

- The Influence of Augustine (Protestant Reformation)
  - Human sinfulness and 'double predestination'
    - Augustine of Hippo, *On Predestination of the Saints* (426)
    - Prosper of Aquitaine, *Calling All the Nations* (450)
    - See *Human Free Will and God's Grace in the Early Church Fathers*: <http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-patristics-on-free-will.pdf> (collection of quotes and comments)
  - Human desires
    - Give us no meaningful information
    - Desire for 'self-justification' to 'deserve' things
  - Practical outcomes
    - Bad listening
    - Suspicion of one's neighbor, fear of their sinfulness
    - Suspicion of one's self

# Protestantism and the Human Being

- Human Being, Human Becoming: Returning to the early Christian vision
  - Secular
    - Therapy, Psychology, Neuroscience
    - Child Development
    - Social Work
  - Pastoral
    - John Wesley and Methodism
    - Liturgy and Church Calendar
    - Spiritual Disciplines and a Rule/Rhythm of Life
      - e.g. Pete and Jeri Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*
    - Spiritual Direction



# Protestantism and the Human Being

- Human Being, Human Becoming: Returning to the early Christian vision
  - Evangelism
    - Desire for goodness, beauty, love, connection, justice, order, etc.
    - Desire for a happy ending
    - Desire to be more good, beautiful, loving, connected, just, ordered, etc.
    - Desire for a truly good God
    - Interesting possibilities with Islam
  - Political
    - Virtue Ethics

# Protestantism and the Human Being

- The Return to the Early Christian Vision: Human Being, Human Becoming

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