

# Meditations on Genesis

St. Charles de Foucauld

Translated by Brandon P. Otto

## Introduction

St. Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916) was a French cavalry soldier before deciding to resign from the military in order to go explore Morocco. After publishing a well-received book about his travels, he returned to France and rekindled his childhood Catholic faith, deciding to join the Trappists in 1890. His time with the Trappists led him to Syria, but he eventually left the order in order to become a hermit, in 1897. After being a porter for Poor Clares in Nazareth and Jerusalem, he returned to France for ordination in 1901, then headed back to Africa, this time Algeria, to continue this eremitic life. Though he hoped to attract others and form a community, none came. Instead, he remained a hermit, living among the Tuareg people of Algeria, collecting their poems and writing a dictionary of their language. A bandit raid on his hermitage--considered a martyrdom--claimed his life. After his death, his writings and example inspired communities like the one he hoped to create. He was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI on November 13, 2005, and canonized by Pope Francis on May 15, 2022.

Besides his travelogues and books on the Tuareg people, he wrote many meditations of various kinds, which are the main vehicle of his spirituality. Translated here is the first part of an incomplete set of meditations on Genesis; they were written at the end of his time with the Trappists, roughly between November 1896 and January 1897: their incomplete state is due to his departure for Nazareth.

The bracketed ellipses in the text are present in the French original from which I translated; possibly the French editor omitted portions of the manuscript.

Source: *Œuvres spirituelles de Charles de Jésus père de Foucauld* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1958), 55-67.

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*Genesis 1:1-19*

My God, how much I ought to love all creatures, animate and inanimate, since all have departed from Your hands: one cherishes, one kisses, one adores the work of him whom one loves, it's something of his: how much more ought one to cherish Your works, which are made such as You will them, while those of men are always beneath their will... Your works, which You "find good," while those of men are so imperfect! The work of Your beloved will, of Your power, of Your love, of You, finally, God blessed and loved in all the ages! With what love, with what respect, ought He be surrounded! With what moved eyes ought He to be regarded! With what respectful, trembling hands ought He to be touched! How much ought our indignity be felt before each of them, not an indignity from nature, but an indignity from our sins! How much ought I to respect myself, body and soul; "this would be to kiss one's own hand," says Mgr. Gay! How much ought one's neighbor be respected! How much ought our brothers the animals, our sisters the inanimate creatures, all departed from your blessed and adored hands, be respected! With what an atmosphere of love have You enwrapped us, my God, and how much ought my heart to love, I who live in my Beloved, penetrated, co-penetrated by Him, and enwrapped by His cherished works! How good You are! How blessed am I! What kind of fortune is mine! How much ought I to melt with love! How good You are! Saint Francis of Assisi, in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, pray for me, so that I might love God, His Christ, and His works with you! Amen.

*Genesis 3:13-end*

My God, how good You are! At the very moment when You punish Adam, You give him hope, and the hope of the greatest glory and of the greatest blessedness: You let him see, from afar, that "seed" and that blessed women through whom the head of the serpent will be crushed... How good You are, my God! How You are always the same! How You are always He Who "does not crush the half-split reed, and Who does not quench the yet-smoking wick" (Mt 12:20). And do You not still do the same every day? Do You not cry out, through the voice of Your Church, that, whatever our crimes, however long our infidelity, we have but to return to You, to repent, to be saved, to be, not merely delivered from evil, but rendered heirs of all glory and of all blessedness? My God, how good You are! There is no sinner so great, no criminal so old, to whom You do not offer Paradise with a loud voice, as You gave it to the good thief, for the price of a moment of good will. And this truth, You proclaim it, You cry it out through all the world, from all the pulpits of all the Churches, in all the books of Your doctors, in all the catechisms. My God, how good You are!... O my God, render us recognizing, we to whom You offer this infinite favor which You gave to the good thief; and make it that we imitate You, in never despairing of ourselves, nor of our neighbor, but in always hoping, with all our soul, that he will be saved; and in never despairing our neighbor, that is to say, when, for the good of souls, we punish him, in making him see how he can, how he ought to correct

himself, for this punishment is not a sign which forever marks him as evil, but a means for him to re-enter into the good, and making him see that, however culpable he be, he can, despite the chastisement and the grace of the chastisement, re-enter into the good, into perfection, and become a saint; he can do it, he ought to do it, we hope for him, God opens His arms to him for this. The Heart of Jesus, which has so suffered for him, desires him, hopes for him, thirsts for him, and makes it easy for him.

*Genesis 8:13*

My God, how good You are! That You would do good upon good, grace upon grace, for us, does this not suffice? Why do You still engage Yourself in doing this for us, in doing such and such a benefit for us? My God, how paternal is Your Heart, how divinely good It is, how It overflows with infinite love! If it were still in the face of our acts of adoration, of recognition, of obedience, that You made these promises to us: but, no, it is to Adam, at the very moment when he sinned; how good You are! How gratuitous are Your benefits! All Your Scriptures are full of nothing but benefits and promises, even greater than Your benefits: You take pleasure in engaging Yourself in a thousand ways: promises of the Messiah to Adam, promise of not sending a deluge again to Noah, Messianic promises without number and material promises to the patriarchs and to the prophets... Your joy is to bind Yourself with multiplied promises: there, indeed, is love: it does not suffice it to give the present, it is necessary that it give the future, it is necessary that it give, as much as possible, all that it has and all that it is and that it is engaged in, through the strongest bonds, for a time whose end it does not wish to see... It is this that You do: You give, You promise, You give Yourself Yourself, You promise Yourself Yourself, even with Your kingdom, and this for entire eternity. My God, how good You are! And is there not a practical conclusion to draw from this, beyond that of the infinite gratitude and of the infinite love that we owe You? That conclusion is the excellence of vows, the excellence of perpetual engagements: to take on these engagements, to bind oneself by such chains, is a need of love, a pledge of love that every loving heart has need to give, to such a point that You Yourself willed to bind Yourself to us with a thousand engagements, a thousand promises: thus, let us hold vows in great esteem, let us regard making them as a great blessedness, let us desire to make them, and let us make, when our directors permit us, all those which would more tightly unite us to God, all those which we know are agreeable to Him... O my God, make me make the vows to You that You will that I make to You, and make me be faithful to them!

*Genesis 14:1-12*

My God, why do You recall to us those kings, those wars of times past?

My child, they have been, and they are no more: they seemed great, and you see their nothingness... such are the great ones of today: power, birth, fortune, these are the equivalent

of those poor ancient kings who are, you see, a bit of dust; all the goods, all the consolations, all the beauties that pass away are so...All is equally small, equally nothing, the equal of those poor kings who fell asleep so long ago...One single hard thing, God and souls...Hold, then, as nothing, as absolutely nothing, all the grandeurs, all the contempts, all the elevations, all the abasements, all the consolations, all the sorrows, all the delights, all the sufferings that pass away. Attach yourself to Me alone, to loving Me, to doing that which pleases Me, and to the souls in My sight, desiring their salvation and laboring with all your forces...You see here, among other things, how much you ought to throw your body into mortification, since, on the one hand, you ought to fear nothing in it, since it passes away, and, on the other hand, you ought to seek it with ardor, unto folly, since it pleases Me, since it consoles Me: I see in it an act of love for Me, and a sacrifice in view of the salvation of neighbor...To mortify yourself is to obey My word, to follow My example, to make Me a declaration of love, to aid Me in bearing My Cross, to labor with Me for the salvation of My children, to tell Me that you want to truly be My faithful spouse, to share all My pains and to bear the crown of thorns with Me. Do you think that this pleases Me?...If you doubt this, ask it of Saint Magdalene and of Saint John the Baptist: they had My spirit; they loved Me enough, glorified Me enough, they have the grace to answer you...Or, better, ask it of Me: My crèche, Nazareth, the Forty Days, the journeys without a stone on which to lay My head, the praetorium and the Cross will answer you: they will tell you what I think of mortification.

#### *Genesis 17:1-16*

It is to all of us, my God, that You say, as to Abraham: “Walk in My presence, and be perfect.” To keep oneself in Your presence is the means, the cause: to be perfect is the result, the effect, the end. “Be perfect as Your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). You tell us to be perfect and, at the same time, You show us the means to become so, which is to keep oneself ceaselessly in Your presence...When one is under the eyes of him whom one loves, can one do otherwise than tending, with all the powers of one’s being, towards pleasing him in everything?...If we constantly dream that we are under the eyes of God, before Him, with Him, could we do otherwise than constantly trying to please Him as much as possible? And to please Him as much as possible, what else is this but being the most perfect as possible? One is so hot, so courageous, so strong, so attentive, so careful to do all that which will please, all that which will be agreeable, approved, one keeps such a watch over one’s words and one’s actions; as to thoughts, they are so suspended, so sunk into contemplation of the beloved being, when one is under the eyes of him whom one loves. And, at all the moments of our life, we are under Your eyes, my God, much closely, much more intimately, than we can be with it matters not which human being, in the most intimate tête-à-tête...You, You are not only near us, You are around us, and You are in us; You envelop us and You fill us, You, You do not only know our words and our actions, but even our most secret, our most fleeting thoughts...O my God, make me think, without cease, on this blessed truth: if one moment in the company of him whom one loves seems so sweet and has a higher price than the entire earth, which, with all

that it contains, is nothing and is less than nothing beside one look from the beloved being, beside one moment in his presence, what is our infinite felicity, we, who, all the moments of our life, enjoy the presence of our Beloved? O my God, make me feel this presence, make me enjoy it, and think without cease, and be perfect through it! *Amen.*

*Genesis 21:1-14*

How marvelous is the obedience of Abraham! What an example You give us here, my God!... It is so much more admirable since it is not merely against the inclination of his heart that Your servant acts: this would already be a great merit, for, in the end, it is nearly the sacrifice of His first son that You demand of him as You will demand of him the sacrifice of the second... But here there is more than a sacrifice of heart: it is against this that his conscience told him what You tell him to do! You tell him to do the opposite of what seemed just to him... But he has faith in You and, knowing that it is You Who speak to him, he obeys, with reason, for You are justice and holiness itself... How faith and obedience are united! Faith is the beginning of all good, and obedience is its consummation, for obedience is the consummation of love... When one disobeys, this is always a lack of faith, for who would disobey before the certitude that God speaks...? When one does not want to obey, one makes his ear deaf, one does not listen to the voice of grace, one objects a thousand reasons to it, one does not listen to those who are changed with telling us the truth, one finds motives for challenging them, one remains in an eternal obscurity because one blocks up his eyes himself, and one ends by not obeying, because one hasn't believed in the order of God when it was made understood... My Lord and my God, preserve me from this misfortune. It is not only from my mouth but from the depth of my heart that I want to do Your will, Your entire will, Your will alone, Your will and not mine; make me know it, my God, and make me do it... Give me the faith and obedience of Abraham; make me hear Your voice... Your interior voice, the voice of those through whom You speak to me... Give me faith, my God. And give me obedience, the obedience which sacrifices the dearest affections of the heart and the most resolved persuasions of the spirit to attach itself uniquely to Your holy and blessed will. My God, I ask this of You with all my heart, through Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Genesis 22:1-12*

Before such an obedience, which supposes such a faith and which proves such love, it is more worthwhile to be silent than to speak... Let us be silent, let us admire, let us pray... Saint Abraham, be blessed! Saint Isaac, you who let yourself be tied upon the altar so sweetly, be blessed! My God Who makes such virtues germinate among men, be blessed unto the ages of ages! Love is to obey You, to obey You with this promptitude, this faith, in that which breaks the heart and overthrows the spirit, in that which overturns all the ideas that had been made; love is the immediate, absolute sacrifice of what is most dear to one, for Your will, that is to say,

for Your glory (for, necessarily, You always will Your glory): the sacrifice of the only-begotten son, of that which is most dear, most cherished by our heart... Love is to exchange all goods for all sorrows for love of the Lord... It is this that you marvelously do in rousing yourself at the start of the night to go sacrifice your son, Saint Abraham! It is this that You do, O Son of God, in coming from heaven to earth to live such a life and to die such a death!... My Lord and my God, make me do this too, according to Your most holy will. Saint Abraham, Saint Isaac, pray for me!

*Genesis 25:1-18*

My God, among the teachings that You give us here, there is one above all that springs up, it seems to me, which is that of the union there ought to be among brothers. We see the union of the sons of Abraham manifest itself at the death of their father, then at the death of Ishmael... And yet these brothers were from mothers of different conditions, they lived apart, the ones from the others, and they had received very unequal portions from their father... Yet, how united they are!... And we too, we ought to be united with our brothers, even the farthest separated, even those given a different portion by God... Sons of Isaac by faith, we are the heirs of all the goods of the heavenly Father... But we ought to love, to invite to be united to ourselves, to regard as brothers, to make profit from our riches, these less favored brothers who are dispersed by all the winds of heaven: let us call them to ourselves, let us fraternize with them, and, since our riches are so great that, more fortunate than Isaac, we can give to infinity without ever being impoverished; on the contrary, the more we give, the more we enrich ourselves (and, in sum, the only means by which we can enrich ourselves is by giving); let us give, let us fully share our riches with our brothers, with these sons of Ishmael, so poor; the more we share, the more we will become rich... Let us regard these sons of Ishmael as our brothers: let us imitate our Father Isaac, let us love them fraternally, and let us share with them all our goods, let us run to offer them to them and to plead them to accept them.

*Genesis 28:11-end*

[...] It is at the moment when Jacob is on the road, poor, alone, when he lies down upon bare earth in the desert to take his repose, after a long journey by foot, it is at the moment when he is in this dolorous situation of an isolated traveller in the midst of a long voyage to a strange and savage country, without shelter, it is at the moment when he finds himself in this sad condition that God heaps him with incomparable favors. He appears to him in a magnificent vision where, after having shown him the angels ceaselessly occupied with guarding men, going ceaselessly from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth to give them all that they need, He promises him to protect him during all his voyage, to fill him with graces during his life and after his death, to bless, in one of his descendants, all the peoples of the earth, to make the divine Savior be born from among his small children... He so envelopes him in clarity and goodness that Jacob, that poor traveller, so broken and so sad in his lying down, relieves himself in crying out: "This place is none other than the house of God and the

gate of heaven.”...Who would henceforth be afraid of making—especially if it is to follow You, my God, to love You better, and to serve You better—who would be afraid of making long journeys by foot, through unknown peoples, alone and poor? Who would be afraid, when You flood with such delights those who seem destined for so many sorrows? O my God, how easy it is for You to change sorrow into joy, to flatten the mountains (Is 40:4), to make what seems nearly impossible easy...“Seek the kingdom of God and all the rest will be given through as well” (Mt 6:33)...Let us do the most perfect, let us undertake it, and God will make it succeed...And let us not fear long journeys by foot, alone, begging our bread with Saint Peter, Saint Paul, so many other saints, since we see that it is most perfect to undertake them; we are never alone; our guardian angel covers us with his wings, Jesus is in our heart, God envelops us, the holy Virgin has her eyes upon us, and it is on journeys that appear so sad to us that God forces us to cry out: “This place is the house of God and the gate of heaven.”

*Genesis 29:20*

The last words of this passage are a very remarkable note: Jacob loves Rachel and labors seven years to obtain her, “and these days seemed little to him because of the grandeur of his love”...We, too, we labor seven years to obtain the possession of our heavenly Spouse: what ought our sentiments to be during this time? Ah, doubtless, it is permitted us to sigh after His possession, to desire, with a great desire, to see the end of our testing, but, despite this haste to see the end of the seven years, the days ought to pass quickly for us...Why? Because, when one is hot, when one burns, one does all with such zest, with such zeal, that one does not feel the times pass by. Thus ought it to be with us...in all ardently desiring the end of our exile, we ought to see the days, and the months, and the years, pass by like a dream, since, if we love, our moments will all be employed, without exception, in thinking of our Beloved and in laboring for Him: and how many moments full of thought, of service of the Beloved, will pass by like a flash for the heart consumed with love?...Let us receive this lesson from Jacob! And if we find the daily labors long, if sadness, or boredom, or discouragement, threaten to enter into our souls, let us recall Jacob, let us say: “You do not love...If you loved, you would think of your Beloved, and the time would pass quickly by, you would labor for your Beloved, and the time would pass quickly by. Think night and day of your Beloved, and in the means of serving Him, think of Him with a heart burning with love, and the years will seem to you like *they did* to Jacob, shorter than the days”...

Thank You, my God, for having given me, through Your holy Patriarch, this great lesson of love...But how sad it is, my God, that human love could so often give this lesson to the love we have for You...O my God, inflame me, change my heart, make me love You!



*Genesis 37:1-17*

[...] Let us greet this person of Joseph, one of the most perfect figures of Our Lord. From here, he begins to be His figure: he is an extraordinary child: “His father considers the thing in silence,” as will one day be said of Mary (Lk 2:19). He sees, in a dream, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars adore him; could one not say “Mary, Joseph, and the eleven faithful apostles”? A day will come when his father and his brothers will be at his feet: to what altar did this happen, except at Jesus? He is a prodigy of sweetness, and he is persecuted...He will be cruelly persecuted for a long time; so many characteristics of Our Lord...

My God, how good You are in making all the pages of the Old Testament thus speak of You! How good You are for Your having been announced in so many ways! For our fathers having spoken so much of You before Your coming, for their having so well shown what You would be, what Your Spirit, Your Life would be! How good You were for them, my God, and how *good* You are for us, for You make *us* profit now from all these goods, making us read the Gospel, not only in the New Testament, but in all the pages of the Old!