

Turning  
to the  
Mystics



# Mechtild of Magdeburg

Mechtild of Magdeburg: Session 3  
with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics. Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time together, turning for guidance to the Christian Mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg Berg. As Mechthild continued writing *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* over the years on up to her death, really, she continues to share these ecstatic exchanges between herself and God. As we read or as we listen to these exchanges, even though we may not be experiencing God's intimate oneness with us with the depth or purity that she does, the extent to which we're moved by the beauty, by the poetic beauty of that union bears witness that we're already on this love path of which He speaks and offers us guidance being receptively open to it that it might deepen throughout the course of our life. As the years went on, these exchanges continued but she begins to layer in other aspects of love. For example, she starts layering in the difficulties and challenges of everyday life in which this love is experienced. In the Beguines, they didn't take vows, they lived in community, but they did vote for someone to act as their superior or guide.

So she talks about the troubles of just the politics of things and personalities and so on, life, just the complexities and challenges of life. Also, she talks about problems with the church, the fear of persecution that we said earlier. The Dominicans supported Eckhart and so on, supported the Beguines, but the church persecuted the Beguines and eventually shut the movement down for reasons due to the fact that they weren't directly under the bishop and they weren't directly under a religious superior under vows, so there was that, and being questioned like, "What right do you have, an uneducated woman to be claiming to know God's love in this way?" There was all of that. Then she goes also, which I want to focus on here, into deeper dimensions of this love. In these deeper dimensions of this love, the first theme I want to focus on and explore with you is found in section 24 of the second book, which is on page 91 and 92 of the text.

She begins at the bottom of page 91, "Lord, Heavenly Father, between You and me, there goes unceasingly an imperceptible breath in which I come to know and see many marvels and inexpressible things. Unfortunately, they do me little good because I'm such a worthless vessel that cannot endure your slightest spark." So she starts out by acknowledging this sweetness of this breath between herself and God. It's always there. It's always there, but also in her wavering ways that she's not able to consistently be one with this love breath between herself and God that's always there. So the path then is being healed from these hindrances to move into a nevermore habitual underlying awareness of the ever-present generosity of God's loving presence given to us as our very life, as a passage of time and of all things and our nothingness without God. In this then she helps us to understand that the degrees of this process, of the purification, of this love, and she speaks about it in the terms of bound love and unbound love.

Concerning unbound love, she writes in this same section, "Unbound love dwells in the senses because it is still mixed in such a way with earthly things that a person can cry out. Love is in grace, distant in the senses, has alas not yet climbed to top the soul. That is this love is not to be understood it as a love that I'm able to feel, although it spills over into feelings, it's the love that's in this communion with God that is the very life of God shared with us as our life, and the very senses, although it spills over into the senses, the senses aren't capable because they're finite, are not capable of sustaining that ever-present love that's always there is life itself. So insofar as it still mingled with the senses that waivers comes and goes, there's the inconsistency of the ability to abide in the love that eternally abides with us

moment by moment by moment.”

She continues, “Many people have fallen because their soul remained unwounded. Solomon and David receive the Holy Spirit in their human senses. But when the senses changed, they fell into false love. God knows their soul had not sunk into the lowest depths beneath all creatures, nor was it wounded by the powerful part of love for he who never tasted the best wine often whoops it up the most, this unbound love then. There is a failing and just through human weakness, but the failing doesn’t go so deep that we fall through the bottom of human failing into the infinite love that is waiting for us and sustains us in the midst of our failing. We go into the failing and then we stop there. We get stuck in this wavelength of failing, and we don’t pass all the way through the failing into the depth of the love that sustains us unexplainably in our failing.”

This she refers to as bound love. Concerning bound love, that is, this bound love of God bound to us invincibly precious in our wayward ways. Concerning bound love, she says, “Bound love dwells in the soul and transcends the human senses and concedes the body nothing at once. It is restrained and very calm. It lowers its wings and listens for the inexpressible voice and gazes into the incomprehensible light and works with great desire to achieve the will of its Lord. If the body can still flap its wings, the soul can never reach the heights that are attainable for human beings.” In this bound love, the wounded soul becomes rich and her external sense is very poor because the more riches God finds in her, the deeper the humility lowers herself because of the true nobility of her love. I cannot imagine a person bound by the deepest stirrings of powerful love falling into serious sin, for the soul is bound. She has to love. May God thus bind us all.

I’d like to reflect on this. She’s using this poetic imagery because this is so subtle, these poetic metaphors that if the soul can flap its wings, if it can ascend by its own powers to try to draw closer to God, as long as it relies on its own powers to make the ascent into God, then it falls short of this breath in which the soul and God are unexplainably entwined forever with one another. We were saying in an earlier reflection too, that I think relevant to this is that when they asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment that is out of all these beautiful things that you say about God and God’s presence in our life, what is it that if we would put our mind and our heart in alignment with that everything else You say would fall into place?” Jesus responded not with something we’re supposed to believe and not with something that we’re supposed to live up to. He says, “Is the greatest commandment, is that we love God with all our soul, with all our mind on all of our strengths.”

So the lesson I see in the light of Mechthild, she’s saying, It’s to love God with all my soul. I don’t know what all my soul is. I only have a partial understanding of my soul that is the interiority of myself. I don’t know what all my heart is, but all my mind is. But God does know, because God creates the totality of my mind, one with God and my nothingness without God, the totality of my soul, one with God and my nothingness without God, one in every aspect of my being. So I surrender myself over then to this love and give myself to this love because in the acknowledgement that I really don’t know what all my soul is, all my might is, all my strength is, in the acknowledgement that I really don’t know.

The humility of that acknowledgement is the portal or the opening through which God accesses us and reveals to us the fullness of our heart, of our mind, of our strength, which is

really the very fullness of God being poured out and given to us is our very life as the beloved, as the one in our nothingness without God.” I think it helps too, when she talks like this, again, to keep in mind that we live our life at incremental realizations of infinite generosity, that the infinite generosity of God is being infinitely poured out and completely given away in and as the intimate immediacy of the gift and the miracle of our lives in our nothingness without God, and that infinite generosity is being poured out whole and complete even in the least most limited stirrings of love in our heart.

So for example, the very first moments in which an infant smiles as the parents lovingly looking into the infant’s eyes smiling with delight, even though that infant’s smile of love is so limited, the essence of the smile is the limitless love of God incarnate in and as the infant’s smile, which makes the infant smile so disarming to the parents, its limitless nature in the limits. Also, this infinite love is being poured out into the parents. Certainly as adults, they’re certainly more developed in the capacity to love and be loved, but being finite, being finite, their finite love for their child and their love for each other is compared to the infinite love of God and infinitely less than that love. Yet, it’s that infinite love itself that’s giving itself to them, holding complete in the limitations of their love, which renders the ordinariness of their day-by-day love, holy and Godly, incarnate infinity intimately realized little by little now here and now there in the ways of our life.

So this from our standpoint then throughout our whole life, there’s this unbound love. Unbound meaning is carried away by the senses. It’s carried away by situations. It’s carried away by reactivity. It’s still very much caught up in all of this, but bound love, bound loved wells in the soul and transcend human senses and concedes the body nothing that at once is restrained and very calm. How so? It’s restrained and calm because it resides in the abyss like depth of God’s infinite love beyond the senses, but is although it spills over into the senses with tremors of love and intimations of love, that overflow of those tremors and intimations are seen as the overflow of the love that’s deeper than the senses, the deeper than the mind can comprehend, deeper than the strength can reach, and we learn to dwell there this way. I also think another way to look at this understanding about bound love or insight about bound love, and it’s certainly in prayer, the rendezvous with God.

We can see it’s a beautiful way to understand the subtlety of the quiet time with God, this sweet surrender to God’s love surrendered over to us unexplainably forever and the sincerity of our sitting, the sincerity of our fragility like this. But there’s also another dimension to this, and I think this has to do with her life as a Beguine, is that bound love is that you... I’ll use some examples. Let’s say married love for example. Married love every couple knows is unbound in many ways. They get caught up in the waywardness of trip wires and have to sort all these things out as best they can, but it can reach a certain point where the love is bound. That is, it’s bound, that the beloved is really realized to be the beloved infinitely beyond anything one can comprehend and yet is somehow present to you in your love for the beloved.

When the beloved returns the favor in all your wavering unbound ways and sees in you that you’re bound to each other in the freedom of love. Same with parenting,

but it's also true, say someone's first starting out on the path of being called to be a poet. There's a lot of unbound love, the fluctuations of fidelity to poetry, but then there's the inner imperative, one must do it. One cannot not be faithful being surrendered over to the flow of the poetic. So too with some musicians and composers, performers, so too with some artists, they cannot not do it, that they're bound in obediential fidelity to a sweet surrender of a love or a gift that channels itself through them. So you get a sense when you see their painting or like with Mechthild too, you hear the rhythms of her voice. You get a sense it's the rhythm and cadence of God's voice flowing through her bound love, the imperative that she could not not surrender over and channel this voice to the community and then centuries later to us, how it touches us in this way.

So it can be a classroom full of students, it can be the community. It's where you've been impelled by a love that binds you, but infidelity to the binding you're free. You're free. May God thus bind us all that we might be so free to be bound by this love 'cause God freely chooses to be bound to us as the beloved. In the reciprocity of this love, our destiny is fulfilling the intimacy of our body, the intimacy of our day-by-day life. There's a second insight that she gives into these more paradoxical realms and depths of love. The second way is found, it's on page 226 of the text. Section I of Book VI, she begins this way, "When because of a real need to achieve a practical result, a person toils the same love with which he prayed, then he is a human God with Christ. But what one botches up and does not to no practical purpose and out of no real need is all dead to God."

So there is this purity of intention in which we surely seek to do God's will by doing what love calls and ask us to do day-by-day in our life. When a person purely for the love of God and not for earthly rewards instructs the ignorant, converts sinners, consoles the despondent and brings those in despair back to God, then He is God the Spirit with the Holy Spirit. That is a very blessed person who does everything humanly possible that is praiseworthy in God's eyes with that same love for God, praise and with the constant good intention of his whole heart. That person is one whole person with the Holy Trinity, so there's that. There's the gift of that. I praise the Lord, but then she says, "But the dust of sin that settles upon us constantly, even against our will is quickly annihilated by the fire of love when the glance of the eyes of our soul touches the Godhead with a lonely sighing of sweet desire that no creature can resist."

I'd like to reflect on this. She says that when she goes to prayer, I want to read what she says first, which seems hard to figure out exactly what this means. Then I'd like to see what it means to me, see what you think it means to you and what the truth is that she's getting at here about love's ways. "When I, the most wretched persons go to my prayer, I deck myself out according to my worthlessness. I dress myself in the foul puddle that I myself am. Then I put on the shoes of precious time that I wasted day after day. Then I gird myself with the suffering I have caused. Then I put on a cloak of wickedness of which I am full. Then I put on my head a crown of secret shameful acts that I have committed against God. After this, I take in my hand the mirror of truth's knowledge. Then I look at myself in it and see who I really am.

Alas, I see nothing but utter mystery. I prefer to wear these clothes rather than to have my wish regarding all earthly possessions. Yet, they cause me such distress in my wretched fury that I would rather be clothed with hell and crowned with all the devils if this could happen through my fault of mine. Alas, how very often do robbers of our own fickleness come and strip these clothes from us when we are pleased with ourselves? In our guilt, we declare ourselves innocent.” I’d like to reflect on this. I have to make sense of this. It isn’t as it first might sound like giving herself over to feelings of low self-esteem and self-loathing that she’s wicked and that she’s worthless and it’s more intimate than that. I want to give two examples of this. I did an online course with CAC on mystical sobriety and walk through the steps of the 12 steps of recovery. The first step of recovery begins, this is for the addict who’s in the midst of their addiction and they say, “We have come to admit that our lives have become unmanageable, that we’re powerless over alcohol.”

It begins really when they hit bottom and they come to the bankruptcy of their ability to deliver themselves from the addiction to alcohol that’s destroying them and taking away their life. So they begin by admitting it, not because they’re choosing to say shameful things about themselves. They’re admitting it because they’re in the midst of the shame-filled powerlessness to deliver themselves from how they’re being carried away and destroyed and undone by their addiction like this. It goes even deeper. Not only do they then say, “Yes, I admit this. So if it’s all up to me, I’m finished. If I admit this, it’s like admitting to despair. Unless there’s another way that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity, that maybe there’s a power that can achieve in me what I’m powerless to achieve. But it can achieve it only by admitting that I’m powerless and then I have to hand my life over to the care of that power to deliver me, to achieve in me the deliverance that I’m powerless to achieve.”

So here’s the message in it if we look at it this way, that when we admit our powerlessness in the very midst of ongoing powerlessness, in the very active admitting it to the higher power, the deep admitting to the higher power of our powerlessness is the portal through which this love power of the divine accesses us and takes us to itself is unexplainably precious in the very midst of our brokenness. That is, it lays bare and unravels the authority of the brokenness to have the say in who we are, for it lays bare the invincible love that sustains us as the beloved, an invincibly love and invincible lovable that’s been buried under the rubble of internalized survival strategies, learned in trauma and abandonment. We believe they have the authority to name who we are, hence the shame, hence the guilt, hence all the rest of it. It’s like the idolatry of internalized conditioned woundedness over the infinite love that’s infinitely in love with us is infinitely precious in the midst of our woundedness. That’s the thing.

Furthermore, it even goes on to say like she’s doing in the prayer, There’s a fearless inventory. What’s a fearful inventory? A fearful inventory is you’ll already know enough of your woundedness, you’re afraid of what else is back there. Why? You’re afraid there’ll be one more thing that you’re going to believe in has the authority to name who you are. But what if you already know that none of it has any authority to name who you are? Therefore, the more you bring out the fearless inventory, it just exposes more of the vulnerability, which in being deeply accepted as the openness to which the love flows in this infinitely more real, then all your brokenness and takes you to itself in this like this. She continues, “If we want to overcome our shame with great honors, with clothes ourselves with ourselves, so adorned,



I seek Jesus my sweet Lord, and I find him so quickly by no other means as by those things that are repugnant and burdensome.”

One should very eagerly step forward with intense desire, ashamed of one's guilt, and with flowing love and humble fear, then the filth of sin disappears from the divine sight of our Lord. Then lovingly, He begins to cast His radiance toward the soul and she begins to dissolve out of deeply felt love that is so disarming to see how infinitely loved you are and infinitely precious you are in the very midst of the all too real brokenness that plays itself out and has played itself out in your life. The soul loses all her guilt and all her sorrow and He, the beloved Jesus, begins to teach her his complete will. Then she begins to taste the sweetness. He begins to greet her with his Godhead, that the power of the Holy Trinity penetrates fully her soul and her body and she receives true wisdom.

Then He begins to caress her that she becomes weak, that is being weakened by the caress of the infinite beloved that sees in you this infinite love of itself given to you as your very life and in being caressed in this way, you're weakened by it and she so begins to drink in all this love that he becomes lovesick for her. That is the very way in which He's infinitely intimately weakened by being so touched by the love that's infinitely more real and utterly transcends her litany of weaknesses as having authority to name who she is, that love alone has the authority to name who she is. It's in that very weakening that God then and love becomes lovesick for her and they become mutually lovesick unto each other in these inexpressible mutual surrendering to each other in love that is a foretaste of heaven. It's a foretaste of heaven and eternal life.

Then in seeing that we can't bear so much of infinite love and we're still in the body, then He begins to limit the intensity because He knows better her limits than she herself does, that God knows the tolerance level for us to bear this infinite love that we cannot yet bear insofar as we're still held in the traces of our limitations as having authority over us, having the authority to name who we are. So God deliberately, out of love, backs off on the intensity of the infinite union that transcends and permeates our weaknesses through and through and through for all of eternity. Then she begins longing to show Him great faithfulness because she's so grateful, the soul is so grateful for being so unexplainably touched and illumined like this in the intimacy of one's weaknesses filled with this love. Then He begins to strengthen her with holy healing in her soul and all of His gifts.

If she then guards against the ennobled love of her flesh and the alluring sweetness of all earthly things, she will be able to love perfection and gain much praise from God in all things, that is, and I think it means this. Not just that we're learning to grace not to be so overtaken by the weaknesses that hurt ourselves and others and knowing that insofar as we still, like the thorn in the flesh, every time we fall, we know it's just one more opportunity to be sustained by God infinitely loving us in the falling. So we learn little by little to grow an interior strength and groundedness and so on. Søren Kierkegaard, which we'll be looking at later in this series, he puts it this way, Kierkegaard puts it this way. He talks about the leap of faith. “When you come to the end of your own resources at the edge of the precipice,” he says, “you make this leap like a free fall into the bottomless abyss of God's mercy on you. In the free fall,” he says, “you're caught by Christ.”

He says, “Reflected in His eyes, you see your true face. There is no fear there.” This is

Mechthild's love story that she's saying is true of us always like this. "Now, dear fellow, there are still two more things you must guard against with holy zeal, for they have never born fruit. The first is that a man or a woman wants to accomplish much in pursuing good deeds and fine conduct in order to achieve a high church office." Here, she starts criticizing the church, "For the leadership of the church that is itself not grounded in this humility and in this brokenness and how the seduction of empire of searching for a status and achievement in this church. Such an attitude vexes my soul." When such people have then achieved power, their baseness becomes so many faceted that no one voted for them with great enthusiasm, is happy with them, they then become misguided by honors and their false virtues and turn in to vices the seduction of empire, that the community of the church is a community of infinitely love broken people.

Sometimes the brokenness is in the leadership role of this. The second is when a person is chosen rightfully with no meddling on his part, they chose her to be acting superior or the community a person is chosen for the leadership and then changes so completely that he never feels the urge to leave his office. This is a sign of many failings for even if he is irreproachable in it, you should still be fearful and humble. That is, once you're in, you've outgrown your worthwhile energy to serve the community, but you don't want to leave. So we need to be very careful of being acknowledged and offered leadership roles which are really like Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, it's the true service to the world, the true leadership to the world like this. I think then this kind of leadership really is also I feel it can be in service to a community or to the service of, and isn't just the artist surrendering over to the poet or the musician, but to the community of people. You cannot not give yourself to them in love.

The more you give yourself to love and the sweet surrender of love and that surrender, this deep love of God opens up within you and blesses you as it blesses them as a blessed life of humble service. Lastly, she continued on in this way into old age, and she reached a point of fragility where she became blind, and she wasn't able to dress herself. She wasn't able to feed herself, and she lived in a monastery of assertion nuns who took care of her. Not only did she go blind, and not only could she not do anything for herself, but she God took away all traces of the felt sense of God's love. She becomes to the end of her life in a state of powerlessness, and she says that if God wishes her to live this way, she wishes it too. What she begins to express is deep gratitude for the nuns in the way they care for her as a way she experiences God love for her in her powerlessness.

So her life comes full circle and into where the places of the ecstasy in her heart, in the places of other poverty and brokenness that forms a circle and the brokenness and the ecstasy, they touch each other like this, and she becomes utterly ordinary. She becomes utterly ordinary and utterly falling away from the ability to gain footing by her own power to do anything at all. So the last two books of *The Flowing Light the Godhead* are dictated because she couldn't write anymore and she dictated it and she died writing it. The last word she says, she ends her book this way. This is Book VII. In this dialogue between herself and her body, between her soul and her body and death, "Then we shall no longer complain then everything that God has done with us will suit us just fine. If you will now only stand fast and keep hold of sweet hope, obedience is a holy bond. It binds the soul to God and the body to Jesus and the five senses to the Holy Spirit.



The longer it binds, the more the soul loves. The less the body preserves itself, the fairer it works. Shine before God and before people of goodwill.” I’ll end with this thought. You know about her ending. You know what? When my wife Maureen died here in the living room of Alzheimer’s, I was so glad I got to be with her when she died. It was such a gift that I put in *The Healing Memoir* that this poetic image that when we’re born, we inhale. We take in our first gasp of air and we go through all of our days. Our last act on this earth is that we exhale, but we don’t inhale. So just as in the first inhalation, we flow from unseen places and God onto the earthly plane. In our death, we vanish away from the earthly plane, returning to the infinite abyss of God from which we came. So the death itself is not an event, it’s a cessation. It’s the falling away of this. But in the falling away of this is laid bare the deathless beauty of ourself that never falls away, this eternal.

So now we experience it in veiled way through constellations and insights and being encouraged by the teachings of these awakened teachers like Mechthild and a contemplative reading of the scriptures, and it’s veiled, but deeply felt and lived by day by day. But when we die and pass through the veil of death, it’s unveiled unto eternal glory that somehow is obscurely realized even though we’re still on earth, because it’s learning to die of love at the hands of love until nothing’s left of us but love. So the image that I gave earlier so that it says on the crucifixion of Jesus that when He died, they pierced His heart with a lance, blood and water flowed out as the birth of a child. Then when the blood and water flowed out, there was no more Jesus left in Jesus, when there was no more Jesus left in Jesus, the only Jesus that was ever really there is manifested unexplainably to this day throughout the whole world and Jesus says, “Come follow Me.”

So how can we learn then to be unraveled by love? Or I’ll put it another way. The very fact we’re being touched by the beauty of these mystics. We are being unraveled by this love. It’s already unfolding, it’s already being laid bare and the unresolved matters of our heart. So Mechthild then mentors us in this love and is unexplainably trustworthy throughout our days. So with that, then let’s sit meditation. Just sit straight, fold your hands and bow. And bow, slowly say The Lord’s Prayer together, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.” Mary, Mother of Contemplatives, pray for us. Meister Eckhart, pray for us. Mechthild of Magdeburg pray for us. Blessings till next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of *Turning to the Mystics*, a podcast created by the Center for Action and Contemplation. We’re planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at [podcasts@cac.org](mailto:podcasts@cac.org), or send us a voicemail at [cac.org/voicemails](http://cac.org/voicemails). All of this information can be found in the show notes. We’ll see you again soon.