

Turning
to the
Mystics



Mechtild of Magdeburg

Coaching Session: May God Bind Us All
with James Finley and Kirsten Oates

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley.

Kirsten Oates: I'm Kirsten Oates.

Jim Finley: Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Kirsten Oates: Welcome, everyone, to season eight of Turning to the Mystics where we've been turning to the German mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg. In this coaching session, Jim is going to offer us a way that we can continue to turn to Mechthild for guidance on our own. Jim, thank you for being here and I just wanted to let people know that we've put together a worksheet and that should be available in the show notes, and that you might want to print out that worksheet and have it with you for this episode as, Jim, you're going to refer to it, aren't you?

Jim Finley: Yes. I want to add to that also about the worksheet, is that what I'm modeling for you, this lectio meditation and prayer using Mechthild as our guide. You'll notice on the worksheet that Kirsten and I put together under discursive meditation, and I'll walk through these in my reflections, some bullet points. If you find them helpful, you can have the worksheet with you in your meditation and use them as possible guides to help you move along the different layers of your own meditation time. The idea here of this session is that when I was going through Mechthild, I read her and then reflected on her in a very reflective personal way that was consistent with the prayerful way that we received her teaching the teachings of all the mystics.

What I want to do now, Kirsten and I together want to do is kind of model in an even closer way how to pray with Mechthild, how to turn to her for guidance in the prayerful way that allows us to receive her guidance or to receive God's guidance through her with her help. What I want to do is I'm going to offer some guidelines following the series that we did earlier on Guigo II on a Ladder to Heaven, Lectio Divina, discursive meditation, prayer leading to contemplation. I want to follow that classical sequence here and model for you by actually practicing it for you, as a way to help you then on your own kind of get into the stream of this, how to practice this.

Then when I've gone through a passage and walk through it this way, Kirsten will chime in and she'll take a passage and read it and she'll do it as if she was coming to me for spiritual direction, then I'll be asking her leading questions to elicit from her maybe looking a little deeper what that might mean to her and so on. We hope this will give you kind of a hands-on practical way for you to pursue this prayerfully on your own if you're so inclined. We begin then with Lectio Divina, with the lectio. The lectio, as we turn to a passage, and I have a passage here that I've selected that I want to look at. We turn to a passage in Mechthild and first we would... It's best to take a section, one of the sections were a paragraph.

Some of the sections themselves are too long, so it'll be like a paragraph in one of the sections. You would read it very slowly. You might read it very slowly several times and just simply sit in the spirit of the words that you've just read. You just sit with it, because Lectio Divina is sustained attentiveness to a depth of God's presence, not yet thought about. You haven't yet reflected on it yet you don't know what it means, but already an opening yourself, your soul or the interiority recognizes a certain depth or resonance of God's presence in that and you sit with that. Then in the discursive meditation, I'm going to read the text and then

I'm going to model for you walking through this as a discursive meditation and it's real for me.

This is how I would really do it in my meditation. As a guideline to think, like bullet points to be aware of, that's guiding this as I start reading this section that we read it, sit with it, and then ask ourselves. I ask myself, you ask yourself, what is my present understanding of Mechthild's understanding of what she's sharing with us in this passage or what she's sharing with us that God shared with her. Where am I presently at in understanding? Here's where you might journal, this is where you might try to write this out if you find it helpful. The second guiding question, guiding the meditation, the meditation, is when have there been moments in my life where I've tasted a glimpse of something of this sense of God's love that she's talking about?

As subtle as that taste might've been, where has it ever been? For me personally, my understanding, I'll be sharing with you shortly, and for me in my own life, I've been blessed so much in my childhood with moments like this and spending six years in the monastery, there are a lot of moments like this. I was kind of saturated by these kinds of moments. Then in reading Mechthild's words and taking her words to heart. How would I then say, and I'll be doing it, I want to share with you how I would try to say it, but likewise, if you were doing it, you would share how you would try to say it. Either just say it out loud to yourself in the presence of God or write it out if you were going to say it, paraphrase the truth in your own words, like write off on it personally for you to make it personal and then reflect.

The next point would be on how you're learning to understand this love in your life and what it means. By understanding means kind of interiorly appreciate or interiorly recognized in a personal way, the truth of it or the beauty of it, so that today as you write this out, you could look back maybe just a few years back, you wouldn't have been able to be nearly so clear as you are now that you're on a growing learning curve. Likewise, if you just keep going in the years ahead, it'll get even deeper. This ever deepening experiential understanding of internalizing God's word. Then the next question would be, what is his deepening love awareness of Mechthild's God's speaking to me through her. What's it asking out of me?

It's asking out of me to kind of an obedient fidelity to this one in prayer in my heart, but also in my life and my attitudes and my mind and how I treat myself, my attitudes in how I treat other people, how I treat animals and plants and the earth. What's it asking out of me to embody this truthfulness and in this enrichment of living this way? What would my life look like and be more habitually stabilized in this? What would that be? We know we're already on the path of getting there where we wouldn't be touched by the teachings of the mystics. With those questions, these guiding questions, you would then, I'm going to walk through this in a kind of an open-ended kind of way to model for you how you might walk through it this way.

I want to choose a passage that I didn't reflect on before when I was sharing the reflections on Mechthild. This is from section four of book five, which is on page 184 of the text. I'll read this section first and then I'll go back and walk through some sentences and to model this for you. What she's reflecting on here and kind of the paragraph leading into this, she's reflecting on the state of her soul in the presence of God here on earth compared to what it'll be when she crosses through death into glory, an eternal glory with God. She's comparing

those two states where she's now with God and God with her and where she'll be when she dies and passes through death into eternity. Comparing that, she says this, this is the section, this is what she sees utter soul.

The soul is just as beautiful in her body as she is in heaven, but she's not as secure. She, meaning her soul. She's just as bold, but she's not as strong. She's just as powerful, but not as constant. She's just as lovely, but not as happy. She's just as generous, but not as rich. She's just as holy, but not as innocent. She's just as content, but she is not as full. That soul alone is satisfied, which is here flooded with the humble love of God. That's the section. I'm going to walk back now through this, on myself and I'm going to apply it to myself. You'd apply it to yourself like she does with herself. That my soul is just as beautiful now in my body as my soul will be as beautiful as it will be in heaven. It's just that I'm not as secure.

Here's what it means to me as I reflect on it, that my soul is as beautiful in my body, because my soul is beautiful as seen with God as God's beloved. God sees me and creates me as being infinitely beautiful by God as the beloved. This beauty, this God-given godly beauty of my soul, my interiority is God's gift to me. It isn't just notice, she says, it is as beautiful as being in heaven, but I'm not as secure. I know this is true in faith. Jesus told me. I opened the gospels and Jesus told me so, I know this is true, but I'm not as secure as I'll be in heaven. See, I know it, but there's other things going on. It's a little shaky sometimes, especially things that happen during the day like this.

But notice there's something else that strikes me about the text, she doesn't say the soul on the other hand is just as beautiful as she will be in heaven, but she is just as beautiful as she is in heaven. In some sense, I already am in heaven. I already am in God, hidden with Christ and God forever and going off from God here in this moment I haven't left God. Furthermore, it isn't just that I'll be as beautiful as I will be in heaven, but also I'm kind of a celestial beauty in my body, but it's not as secure, because it's hidden from me. It's true, but it's not yet. It shimmers and shines there, but it's hidden from me. I'll do one more couplet.

I'll just do one more in this section to model this. She's just as bold, but she's not as strong. By this, it seems to me clearly, it doesn't mean bold as in brazen or brash or presumptuous with God, but rather bold in how God invites me to be so comfortable with God. God wants me to be bold and at ease with God as God's beloved. I'm bold in a kind of a paradoxical, mysterious way like this. It's homey and close and comfortable, like one dear friend with another forever. Like a field with no stones in it, we're just together like this, together. Just as bold, but not as strong. I'm not as strongly bold. I know I'm comfortable being with you because you invited me and want me to be comfortable with you. That's why you created me, to be very comfortable with you forever.

It's just that I'm not as strongly comfortable, because I'm still a little shaky. Because I still rely or measure up to the extent I'm measuring up to or being true to this in my life like this. What I would do then, if I were practicing this in practice, I would walk in that way through the couplets, through the whole section. I would journal out each one if I was so inclined, like an unhurried, quiet, prayerful, reflective. Then in sitting

with this and taking this in the prayer, my prayer is from the heart center where I ask God to help me with this. I say to God in prayer, "I can't grow closer to you in this way, unless you help me grow closer to you in this way. Help me and guide me in this."

That prayer is the constant of this, asking God to deepen the experiential intimacy of being with God in this way. Then as I go on in this way, I realize there's moments. Here's the contemplation part. I realize that there are certain moments where I'm inclined, I'm inclined in my heart to pause and rest wordlessly in the presence of God, in God's oneness with me beyond words and to let myself as I sit with it being taken by God beyond words. It's like resting wordlessly in the presence of God. Wordlessly resting in me unexplainably. This might happen at the end where I would invite it. See, I would just sit very, very quiet in a stance of attentiveness inviting it.

But it might be, here's another subtle thing for me I think is important. Sometimes when two people that love each other very much are having an intimate conversation, it's really true that the shared sense of intimacy, they do fall silent, but sometimes they don't. But the rhythm of the words embodies the silence of love that the words cannot adequately express. You may notice this contemplative resting in the rhythm of the words themselves or you may also notice you're inclined to sit in the silence of this oneness with God beyond words. Lastly, as you end the session you would ask God for the grace not to make the thread of this sensitivity as we go through the day. Asking God for the grace to catch glimmers or little touches of God's infinite oneness with me, it is always there.

Even though we know it's always there, the thing about this is the contemplative way of life. We'll notice as we watch through this and have this intention, it breaks a lot. Matter of fact, it's broken a lot. But knowing that no matter how often it breaks, the thing about it is now we're aware that it breaks and we can tell it's breaking, because we get reactive. We give authority over the conditioned state to name who we are. How the income of the outcome of this turns out, what this person thinks of me, how this is going to go determines if I'm at peace or not, but know that no matter how often it breaks from my end, I grow in confidence it never breaks from God's end. That God's constancy with me is and the constancy of my inconsistencies of this love.

We can also see why this is a practice because it takes time to be habituated that that which is essential never imposes itself. That which is unessential is constantly imposing itself. Every day there's the rendezvous of this sincerity with God, where we sit with the lectio, the medication, the prayer, resting in this contemplation, carrying it throughout the day so that as the days and the weeks and the years and the months, all this goes by, the more and more and more we ripen or mature in this stabilized state of this oneness with God that she and all the mystics invite us to live by. Those are some offerings that I share with you on how I read Mechthild and the mystics. I hope then you can adapt this to your needs this way.

Now, Kristen is going to chime in here and join us and she's going to take a passage and she's coming to me as if she's coming to me for spiritual direction. She has

Mechthild in hand and she also assumes that as the director I've read Mechthild. She's going to read the passage and share it with me. I'm going to engage in a dialogue with her, like a spiritual direction dialogue and see if this doesn't further enhance your ability to move into this in your own life. Okay, Kirsten?

Kirsten Oates: Okay, thank you Jim. I've chosen just a little paragraph at the bottom of page 335 and it's one you reflected on in the podcast. But this whole section at the end of Mechthild's book really struck me and part of the reason for that is understanding the circumstances she was in when she wrote this. I just wanted to remind people that when this piece was written, she was towards the end of her life and you told us that she'd lost all sense of God's presence in her senses. On top of that, she was blind. She couldn't feed herself anymore, she couldn't dress herself. Someone else was writing the words down for her. It was in that state that she wrote this little section. Shall I read it to you, Jim?

Jim Finley: Yes. Is she here in a dialogue with her body or is she in a dialogue with God or what is this section?

Kirsten Oates: It's a dialogue, the soul with the body.

Jim Finley: Yeah, with the body. Okay, good. Okay, good. Very, very good. Okay, good.

Kirsten Oates: The soul says, dearest prison in which I have been bound. I thank you especially for being obedient to me. Though I was often unhappy because of you. You nevertheless came to my aid on the last day, all your troubles will be taken from you. Then we shall no longer complain then everything that God has done with us will suit us Just fine if you'll now only stand fast and keep hold of sweet hope.

Jim Finley: Then sitting with this then and taking this in, sitting with it, and going, returning now to the first sentence with the words in the first sentence, as she talks to her body, what comes to you in your meditation?

Kirsten Oates: Can I read that sentence again?

Jim Finley: Yeah, read it again please.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, the first sentence. It's the soul talking to the body and the soul says to the body, ah, dearest prison in which I have been bound. I thank you especially for being obedient to me. Firstly, what comes to mind is just a sense of the soul experiencing the body as a prison. Like a limiting place, a place where it senses the limits of the body. But she also says in which I have been bound. What came to me when I read the word bound, it reminded me of when you taught on the unbound and the unbound love that she writes about. That when she talked about bound love, it was a love of oneness. It made me feel like the soul feels also one with the body, limited by the body, but also one with the body in love. Then she says, I thank you especially for being obedient to me. I wonder if what she means there is that she so longs to do the will of God. She's thankful when the body lines up and helps her do the will of God.

Jim Finley: Yes. Something strikes me that you said, tell me about this. Remember when she was talking about bound love and unbound, unbound love waivers and wanders around this bound love.

It's very interesting what you say that somehow this grace of a bound love and being bound to the body, but we could also relate to the body in unbound ways. What do you make of that? What do you-

Kirsten Oates: Well, I think what comes to me when you say that I think about my own experience of knowing what my soul longs for and that in my body and my senses and my emotions and my thoughts, there's many times where I find I'm kind of spun out of alignment with that as fast as snapping my fingers.

Jim Finley: Exactly. Exactly.

Kirsten Oates: I wonder if there's a way that my body isn't always bound to my soul. My soul is always bound to my body, but there's ways my emotions, my thoughts, my... become bound.

Jim Finley: That's very good. Another thing that strikes me here, what do you mean? It's interesting, she calls this prison her dearest prison. What strikes you about that? What comes to you about that? About your body being your dearest person?

Kirsten Oates: It's very loving. It's a loving word. But in general, we don't think of a prison as a loving thing. When I think of the state she was in at this point when she wrote this, when she couldn't see, she couldn't dress herself, she couldn't feed herself, I can imagine that the body felt so limited that it might have felt like a prison that she could kind of long to be free and with God in freedom.

Jim Finley: That's very good. Is that what it means to you also when you think of being unhappy with the body or moments where we taste the limit? What's that mean to you?

Kirsten Oates: Though I was often unhappy because of you, you nevertheless came to my aid. Yes. Yeah. I wonder because when I don't do love's work, it does make me really unhappy, frustrated, unhappy, kind of mad at myself in a way. When the thoughts, emotions, the body strays out of love, it does make me unhappy. But then I guess you nevertheless came to my aid. There's a way, there's something so precious about the way we keep trying and then those moments where we do line up in those ways.

Jim Finley: Yes, I can't help but get the feeling as you and I sit in spiritual direction like this, that if Mechthild, and say spiritually, she is here with us, she'd be pleased. I get the feeling that when people come to her, this is how they talk while searching for the words and how this uniquely came to them, which is what makes it so intimate and so personal. I think this is what she's inviting us to do is what we're doing right now like this. What do you make of, you're telling the body that, about the last day, you're talking to your own body now, that all your troubles were taken away on the last... What was that to you?

Kirsten Oates: One of the things I look for in the mystics is a way to help me die well. I'm grateful to the mystics to help me carve out that place in myself that can be with me when I die. I feel like this is a good example of that. There's something in her that can speak to the body, calm the body, be with the body that will be going through pain, maybe fear, maybe. But there's something bigger in her. She's almost preparing her body for that. On the last day, all your troubles will be taken care of. Don't worry, don't be afraid. I'm here and I want you to know that it's a positive thing that's going to be happening.

Jim Finley: Then she says, then we shall no longer complain. She says we. What do you think then is? What's the then, when you and I, body, will no longer complain then. What's that? What do you think the then is?

Kirsten Oates: When we've returned to our origin, when we're one with God in the way, God's one with us when we're experiencing that.

Jim Finley: That's right. Very good. Lovely. Yes.

Kirsten Oates: I love then everything that God has done with us will suit us just fine. There's a way she's telling us now that when we look back on our lives from that vantage point, the things that feel like we wish they'd never happened or they feel just unfair and painful, there's a certain way once we're with God in that way, that it will all suit us just fine. That's a big statement it seems.

Jim Finley: It's a huge statement.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah.

Jim Finley: It really is. This steep peace. What do you make of the last part? See if you'll now only stand fast, what do you think that means? Keep hold of sweet hope. It's that lovely little ending. What do you see in that for you?

Kirsten Oates: Yeah, because I'm wondering if she's, it's funny, this is right at the end of her book. She's...

Jim Finley: That's how she ends. Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Yeah. There's one last little paragraph. Maybe part of it is just to help me get to the very, very end of this.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

Kirsten Oates: Stand fast with me. Help me finish the book. But then bigger than that, I don't know, there's something about that even as you're dying, keep hold of sweet hope. Stand fast, that death won't have the last say. Her body must be so tired at this point and you shared she wasn't experiencing consolations from God. There's a way she's encouraging her body from the inside rather than feeling the consolations of God in the senses.

Jim Finley: Yes. You know what too, if you feel okay about it, if you then read that last little, the final final words of her whole book, which follows this, if you would read that too.

Kirsten Oates: 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 its works shine before God and before people of goodwill.

Jim Finley: Wow. Any final little thoughts come to you as prayerful thoughts?

Kirsten Oates: I think what's coming to me in that last section is when she says obedience, I don't think she means only when you obey God, you're holy. But it's like the humility of a path of longing to be in connection with and bringing this love into the world. The less the body preserves

itself, I don't think she means that we shouldn't take care of ourselves, that we should be negligent with our bodies. I think she means that we honor that love in a higher order. If we're loving first to ourselves, then there's a way we're taking good care of our body in that sense of love.

Jim Finley: Beautiful. Beautiful. I would say now to you, we're in direction together. To end this session. I can tell when you came in here, you were ready for this. You were going to read this with me. You could see how if you were so inclined on your own, you could do this more all by yourself. Even maybe, several times, every time you'd walk through it like this, that you would go deeper and deeper and deeper this way. This is turning to Mechthild for guidance. Kirsten, now, if you would then take the fruits of these reflections and express it to God as a prayer?

Kirsten Oates: What comes up for me is a prayer. I might cry actually, but I love this line, 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. That's my prayer.

Jim Finley: That's a good prayer. It's a beautiful prayer. Then in the spirit of all this prayerful time with her in God's presence and in the spirit of that prayer, the touching prayer, then let's, a childlike sincerity with this. Let's bow and sit together in silence for a minute or two, and then we'll bow again in gratitude. Let's sit in silence.

Okay. Fold your hands and bow.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you, spiritual director.

Jim Finley: You're very, very welcome. Looking forward, next month to seeing you for our next session.

Kirsten Oates: That was great. You always bring tears.

Jim Finley: Yeah.

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. If you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.