

DML921 Following in Step with the Spiritual Mentors

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LE 2C Mansions of the Heart by R Thomas Ashbrook

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Summary:

Mansions of the Heart touches levels of spirituality that most people never comprehend unless they read contemplative books like this. When Thomas Ashbrook asks in the beginning, "Is this all there is?" he reveals the depth that is missing in many believers' spiritual journey. There is an eternal yearning for a more intimate relationship with God, but too many church goers are "satisfied" with the status quo of walking through the motions of spirituality and running the programs of their churches, but not growing in a profound relationship with the King nor experiencing the power of His Kingdom. They run down "dead end roads," (17) which lead to nowhere.

Believers need to return to the heart of the Christian life which is the odyssey into God's love. The depth of God's love is truly a journey that takes a lifetime to travel. All believers experience the first mansion of being drawn to the love of Christ. Many Christians move into the second mansion of experiencing some of His love, as well as a few hardships of following Jesus. They struggle to grow a relationship with God in the face of these challenges. There is a significant drop off of people going to the subsequent mansions because of greater difficulties, and some don't realize that these other mansions even exist. However, there are still a number of faithful believers who move to the third mansion of "following Jesus," (89) which entails beginning to experience His love in deeper ways than in the previous two mansions, as well as developing structures to deepen their spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, journaling, and serving. Believers in the third mansion also undergo an increase of spiritual attacks from the enemy because of their growth.

Most Christians do not get to the fourth mansion of "discovering the love of Jesus," because they are too busy with various commitments and "doing the work" of the church. Ashbrook states that the transition between the third and fourth mansion is "a subtle transition of huge significance" (107) because the motivation for doing everything has shifted. The love of Christ becomes the motivation and

the power to serve, to pray, to encourage others, to tithe, to do everything in life. Demonic forces also ramps up their attacks, but the believers in this mansion learn to go immediately to Jesus and allow Him to address both internal and external struggles which they face. The intimacy with God increases and people experience sweeter and deeper fellowship with Christ.

The fifth mansion goes even further into this deeper intimacy with Jesus through the yearning for greater Oneness with the Lord. The analogy of this mansion being like an engagement of experiencing deep love for Christ and yet not having that complete union with Him until the seventh mansion is insightful. The dark nights of the soul increase in the fifth and sixth mansions because the few believers who venture into these levels of love are intensely resisted by the enemy. Sometimes the dark nights are for a short duration and other times could be for several months. However, God allows these spiritual “dry” times to purify the love and devotion of His beloved. It is through these dark experiences that believers can let go of self and selfish desires, which they didn’t even know existed.

The sixth mansion’s definitions of “rapture, locution, transport, and flight of the Spirit,” (181) where insightful in putting words to mystical depths of passion for Christ. The chapter on the seventh mansion of complete unity with the Trinity is difficult for almost anyone to grasp, but knowing that some believers have experienced glimpses of heaven on earth is powerfully hopeful. The concluding chapters on the personal and corporate development of spiritual formation gave practical guidance to aid in cultivating hearts and dynamics in local churches to go deeper into this transformative journey of Christ’s love.

Reflection and Questions:

As I read *Mansions of the Heart*, I was struck by how my own heart was warmed and expanded when I journeyed mentally, emotionally, and spiritually with what was happening on at each level. The testimonies of Abigail and Michael were moving and real struggles of growing through each mansion. I was particularly struck by the emphasis on how the practice of prayer was transformed at each stage and especially of learning to pray in silence. This is something I have experienced for years, but couldn't develop words to describe what was happening. However, I realize now that I was beginning to enjoy Jesus for who He is and His love for me. It is the Holy Spirit who enables me to "know" His love in the fullest sense of the word, and leads me deeper into the levels of my heart.

I also benefited from the sections at each mansion on the important spiritual discipline of solitude and to be still before the Lord. Naturally, I am an extrovert and love being with people; I feel that new encounters and relationships energize me. However, I am beginning to realize that being alone with God for extended periods of time renews me in ways that being with other people cannot. I want to continue to progress in these areas of silent prayer and solitude with the Lord, as well as journaling and contemplation. I want to hear the whispers of the Spirit and be more tuned in to His promptings.

When Ashbrook described the spiritual attacks of the enemy at each mansion, I felt like a football player who saw the playbook of his opponent. I became much more aware of the schemes of the devil and his minions. The sections of the book that revealed the internal as well as external temptations were particularly perceptive and preparatory. I realized that the Lord even uses these spiritual assaults to help me to rely more on Christ and His armor, especially the sword of the Spirit, to battle the enemy.

The first question that came to mind as I read each chapter was, "Which mansion am I in?" When I first read this book a few years ago, I thought I was somewhere between the fourth and fifth mansion. However, as I reread it last month, I have come to realize that I have had a few dark nights of the soul, where God was purging my heart of self. I also could relate to some of the "rapturous" experiences of His presence mentioned in the sixth mansion. Therefore, even though I still go in and out of the various mansions, I feel I am progressing into the "passion of God's love." (169). I am deeply grateful for this book and how it has given me perspectives and tools to continue my journey my love affair with Jesus. I asked my wife to read it, but wasn't sure what she would think of it. However, she loved the depth and reflections in *Mansions of the Heart*, and it has helped us to put words to experiences that we are both growing in.

The second question of how to practically continue my journey deeper into His love as well as move towards the seventh mansion came to mind. When I pray about this question, I sense the Lord saying, "Just be with me, listen to me, and I will draw you closer." It is liberating that I don't have to "DO" anything to make this happen, but He will prepare my heart and soul to go deeper with Him when it is the right time. I am certainly enjoying each phase of my journey now and want to grow in relying on His Spirit for my ministry, my family, and my relationship with Christ.

A third question developed as I was writing this paper and that is how to help my leaders and staff progress in their love journey with the Lord. I felt led last month to ask one of my assistant pastors to read this book; we have been discussing roughly one chapter a week with much processing happening each time. Sometimes we take two meetings to discuss each mansion. I would like to ask my board at the River Church to read it eventually, but our whole church will be reading *River Dwellers* this summer and processing it together. I feel like most of our church members are in the first and second mansions,

while some of our leaders are in the third and fourth mansions, but this book will help our church to develop a paradigm to grasp how we can grow and are growing in love for Christ.

Action Steps:

In addition to having various staff read *Mansions of the Heart* and discussing it with them this spring and summer, I feel that the whole church would benefit greatly from *River Dwellers* and then possibly in 2024, we could read *Mansions*. One of the greatest impacts of reading Ashbrook's book was immediate in that my weekly Monday sabbaths began to change in breadth and depth. I would sometimes squeeze in a ministry call or email on my sabbath, but I am better at blocking out a whole day to just "rest" in Christ and listen to His Spirit. I now tell people that I have a ministry commitment every Monday with the Lord, and I will get back to them on Tuesday. It has been refreshing and encouraging to know I have this time to just sit at Jesus' feet.

I have also scheduled more time for personal retreats. I have one coming up in the second week of May to spend a few days in the poconos, praying, hiking, fishing, and golfing with Jesus. It's pretty fun to talk and golf with Jesus. I have also scheduled some time in July to spend a few days camping with the Spirit, where I can literally sense His presence through the beauty of His creation. Even as I feel the wind in my face, I sense the breath of God breathing life into me. I plan to take a few days every quarter to be with the Lord. It's a little easier now that my kids are college age. I am planning on journaling more and reading more books, especially growing in His Spirit; *Joy Unspeakable* is the next book I hope to read this spring.

I also want to encourage my wife to grow deeper in love with Christ. She has finally followed my counsel to take a sabbatical from ministry; it only took twenty years. However, she is currently in the middle of a month sabbatical (from the middle of April to the middle of May) to attend various retreats, read a number of books, go on long walks with Jesus, and to be with the Spirit in silent prayer. She even

wants to go to different monasteries to have her future personal retreats. I am incredibly glad that she is deepening her love affair with Christ through His Spirit.