

Blaise Pascal on the Conversion of the Sinner (1653)

Blaise Pascal, "Sur la Conversion du Pécheur," in *Pascal: Œuvres Complètes*, Louis Lafuma, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 290-91. Translation by Thomas P. Johnston.

"The first thing that God inspires in the soul that he deigns to truly touch, is a knowledge of and an extraordinary insight by which the soul considers things [material] and itself in a completely new way.

"This new light gives her [the soul] fear and brings her a troubled [spirit] that pierces the tranquility she found in the things that gave her pleasure.

"She can no longer taste with ease the things that charmed her. A continuous unscrupulous battle in the midst of pleasure, and an internal view keeps her from finding the usual tenderness associated with [material] things or else they are abandoned with illisiveness of heart.

"But she finds even greater bitterness with the exercises of piety and the vanity of the world. On one hand, the presence of visible objects touches it with more hope than the invisible, and on the other the solidity of the invisible touches it in a greater way than the vanity of the visible. And in this way the presence of the one and the solidity of the other argue against her affection; and the vanity of the one and the absence of the other excites her horror; in this way there is born in her a disorder and confusion that...

"She considers the perishable things as perishable and even as already perished; and the sure fact of the destruction of everything that she loves, she fears this consternation, seeing that every moment the pleasure of good is being taken from her, and that which is the most dear flows away at all moments, and at last a day will come when she will find naked all the things in which she had placed her hope... In this way she will perfectly comprehend that her heart was only attached to things that are fragile and vain, her soul must find itself alone and abandon itself to the ends of this life, as she did not have the care to join herself to a true good which is self-substantial, that can sustain it during and after this life.

"From that point she begins to consider as nothing all that must return to nothingness, the heavens, the earth, her spirit, her body, her parents, her friends, her enemies, her goods, poverty, disgrace, prosperity, honor, debasement, adulation, infamy, authority, destitution, health, sickness, and life itself; hence anything that will endure less than her soul is incapable of satisfying the desire of this soul which seriously seeks to establish itself with a happiness just as lasting as itself.

"She begins to become astonished at the blindness in which she lived. And she considers on one hand the long time in which she lived without considering the great number of people who live likewise, and on the other hand the constancy that the soul, immortal as it is, will never find felicity among perishable things, that will at least be taken from her at death, she enters into a holy confusion and in a bewilderment which will bring a truly salvific perplexity.

"For she considers that whatever the great the number of those who grew older in worldly thinking, and whatever the authorities that this great multitude may have as examples of those who place their hope in this world, it is a constant nevertheless that when the things of the world would have any firm pleasure, that which is considered as false by any number of infinite experiences so dooming and so continuous, it is inevitable that the loss of these things, or finally of death will deprive us of them.

"In this way, by a holy humility, God reveals [himself] above the greatness, she begins to raise herself above the common of humanity. She condemns their conduct, she detests their maxims, she cries at their blindness. She directs herself to seek true goodness. She understands

that there must be two qualities, one which endures as long as she [the soul] and that cannot be taken from her without her consent, and the other that there is nothing else worth loving.

“She sees in the love that she had for the world, she found in it the second quality of her blindness. For she recognized nothing more lovable. But in this she did not see the first [principle of eternity], she knows that it was not the guiding goodness. Therefore she seeks it elsewhere, and understanding that by a completely pure light that it is not in things that are in her, nor outside of her, nor in front of her, she begins to seek it above her.

“This uplift is so imminent and transcendental, that it does not stop in the heavens: there is not enough to satisfy above the heavens, nor with the angels, nor with other more perfect beings. She traverses all the creatures, and cannot stop her heart until she arrives at the throne of God, in which she begins to find her rest and the goodness that is such that there is nothing more lovable, and that can be taken from her without her own consent.

“For even if she does not feel the charms by which God rewards pious habits, she understands nevertheless that the creature cannot be more lovable than the Creator, and her reason assisted with the light of grace shows her that there is nothing more lovable than God and that he can be taken only from those who reject him, because to desire him is to possess him, and to refuse him is to lose him.

“Hence she herself rejoices that she has found goodness that cannot be ravished from her as long as she longs for it, and of which there is none higher.

“And in these new consternations she enters with new insight into the greatness of her Creator, and this with deep humiliations and adorations. She annihilates herself in his presence not being able to consider an idea of herself that is lowly enough, nor able to be able to conceive of a great enough revelation of this true sovereign, she makes new efforts to subjugate herself to the lowest abyss of nothingness, in considering God in his immensities which she multiplies; finally in his revelation, that saps all of her strength, she adores in silence, and she considers herself a vile and useless creature, and by these considerations reaffirmed, she adores him and blesses him, and would want to forever bless and adore him.

“Next she recognizes that it was grace that manifested to her his infinite majesty to such a worthless worm; and after a firm resolution to be eternally grateful, she enters into a confusion for having preferred vain things above this divine master, and in a spirit of compulsion and penance, she falls back on her piety, to quench her anger the effect of which appears dreadful in light of his immensities...

“She makes ardent prayers to God to obtain his mercy in light of that which he revealed to her, that it may please him to show her how to live and how to know the ways to get there. For because it is God to which she aspires, she aspires to arrive there only by the means which come from God Himself, for she wants that He Himself be her guide, her object, her endpoint. Following these prayers, she begins to act, and finds among those...

“She begins to know God, and desires to arrive there; but as she is ignorant of the ways to achieve this end, if her desires are sincere and true, she uses the same methods that another person who wanted to go somewhere to another place, having lost the way, and recognizing her waywardness, took recourse of those who perfectly knew the way of this road...

“She resolves to conform her will the remainder of her life; but in accordance with her natural weakness, being accustomed to her sins wherein she had lived, reduced her to powerlessness to arrive at this felicity, she implores his mercy to achieve him, to attach herself to him, to be eternally affixed to him...

“In this way she recognizes that she must adore God as [she is] a creature, give him thanks as a debtor, satisfy him as a guilty party, and pray as being impoverished.