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Escape from Nihilism



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Sixteen years ago I stood in the Department of Government of the University of Texas to give a talk. I was fresh out of graduate school, and it was my here's-why-you-should-hire-me lecture. I wanted to teach about ethics and politics, so as academic job seekers do everywhere, I was showing the faculty my stuff.

So what did I tell them? Two things. The first was that we human beings just make up the difference between good and evil; the second was that we aren't responsible for what we do anyway. And I laid out a ten-year plan for rebuilding ethical and political theory on these two propositions.

Does that seem to you a good plan for getting a job teaching the young? Or does it seem a better plan for getting committed to the state mental hospital? Well, I wasn't committed to the state mental hospital, but I did get a job teaching the young.

I've been asked to tell you how I became a nihilist, and I've been asked to tell you how I escaped from nihilism.

Perhaps I should first explain just what my argument for nihilism was.

As I mentioned above, I made two claims: first that we make up the difference between good and evil, second that we aren't responsible for what we do anyway. My argument reversed this order, because first I denied free will. The reasoning was not very original. Everything we do or think or feel, I thought, is just an effect of prior causes. It doesn't matter that some of those prior causes are my previous deeds or thoughts or feelings, because those would be effects of still earlier causes, and if we traced the chain further and further back, sooner or later we would come to causes that are outside of me completely, such as my heredity and environment.

Second I concluded that if we don't have free will, then good and evil can't make sense. On the one hand I'm not responsible for my deeds, so I can't be praised or blamed for good or evil; on the other hand I'm not responsible for my thoughts, so I can't have any confidence that my reasoning will lead me to the truth about good and evil. So far it may seem that my argument was merely skeptical, not nihilist. But I reasoned that if the good for man cannot be known to man, then it cannot be offered to man as his good; for all practical purposes, there is no good.

This practical nihilism was linked with a practical atheism, for my arguments were couched in such a way that I thought they applied to God too. He couldn't escape causality either, I thought; therefore He couldn't possess confident knowledge of good and evil any more than I could. And even if He could achieve such a standard, it would make no sense for Him to enforce it. Trapped in causality like Him, human beings have no ultimate control over their conduct. The upshot was that although God might exist, He would be irrelevant. I couldn't quite rule out the existence of God, but I thought I could rule out the existence of a God that mattered.

Holes Large and Numerous

The holes in the preceding arguments are so large that one can see light through them. One hole is that in

order to deny free will I assumed that I understood causality. That is foolish because I didn't know what causality really is any more than I understand what free will really is. They are equally wonderful and mysterious, so I had no business pretending to understand one in order to attack the other. Another problem is that my argument was self-referentially incoherent. If my lack of free will made my reasoning unreliable so I couldn't find out which ideas about good and evil are true, then by the same token I shouldn't have been able to find out which ideas about free will are true either. But in that case I had no business denying that I had free will in the first place.

At this point two things must be clearly understood. The first: One might think that my arguments for nihilism were what led me to become a nihilist, but that is not true. I was committed to nihilism already, and cooked up the arguments only to rationalize it. The second: One might think that my recognition of the holes in the arguments were what enabled me to "escape" nihilism, but that is not true either. I saw the holes in my arguments even at the time, and covered them over with elaborate nonsense like the need to take an ironic view of reality. Good and evil just had to be meaningless and personal responsibility just had to be nonexistent. The arguments were secondary. I was determined.

A friend, may he forgive me for quoting him, thinks my dismissal of my previous rationalizations as elaborate nonsense. Does it seem too pat? Is it really that simple? The answer is that yes, it really is that simple. In my present opinion (though not my opinion of sixteen years ago), modern ethics is going about matters backwards. It assumes that the problem of human sin is mainly cognitive, that it has to do with the state of our knowledge. In other words, it holds that we really don't know what's right and wrong and that we are trying to find out. Actually the problem is volitional. It has to do with the state of our will. In other words, by and large we do know the basics of right and wrong but wish we didn't, and we are trying, for one reason or another, to keep ourselves in ignorance. Is this an *ad hominem* argument that because my motive was bad, my nihilism must have been false? No, it is a diagnosis, with myself as case in point. My nihilism was "false" because it was self-referentially incoherent. [There may exist nihilisms which are false for reasons other than self-referentially incoherency, but I am speaking only of the version I held myself.] The

motive was "bad" because although I knew this to be the case, rather than give up the nihilism I embraced the incoherency. What one must do with such a fellow as I once was is not to tell him what he doesn't know (because he really knows it), but to blow away the smoke screens by which he hides from the knowledge he has already.

The Motives Behind Nihilism

Then how *did* I become a nihilist? Why was I so determined? What were my real motives?

There were quite a few. One was that having been caught up in radical politics of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies, I had my own ideas about redeeming the world, ideas that were opposed to the Christian faith of my childhood. As I got further and further from God, I also got further and further from common sense about a lot of other things, including moral law and personal responsibility.

That first reason for nihilism led to a second. By now I had committed certain sins that I didn't want to repent. Because the presence of God made me more and more uncomfortable, I began looking for reasons to believe that He didn't exist. It's a funny thing about us human beings: not many of us doubt God's existence and then start sinning. Most of us sin and then start doubting His existence.

A third reason for being a nihilist was simply that nihilism was taught to me. I may have been raised by Christian parents, but I'd heard all through school that even the most basic ideas about good and evil are different in every society. That's empirically false as C.S. Lewis remarked, "cultures may disagree about whether a man may have one wife or four, but all of them know about marriage; they may disagree about which actions are most courageous, but none of them rank cowardice as a virtue." But by the time I was taught the false anthropology of the times, I wanted very much to believe it.

A fourth reason, related to the last, was the very way I was taught to use language. My high school English teachers were determined to teach me the difference between what they called facts and what they called opinions, and I noticed that moral propositions were always included among the opinions. My college social science teachers were equally determined to teach me the difference between what they called facts and what they called "values," and to much the same effect: the atomic weight of sodium was a fact, but the wrong of murder was not. I thought that to speak in

this fashion was to be logical. Of course it had nothing to do with logic; it was merely nihilism itself, in disguise.

A fifth reason for nihilism was that disbelieving in God was a good way to get back at Him for the various things which predictably went wrong in my life after I had lost hold of Him. Now of course if God didn't exist then I couldn't get back at Him, so this may seem a strange sort of disbelief. But most disbelief is like that.

A sixth reason for nihilism was that I had come to confuse science with a certain world view, one which many science writers hold but that really has nothing to do with science. I mean the view that nothing is real but matter. If nothing is real but matter, then there couldn't be such things as minds, moral law, or God, could there? After all, none of those are matter. Of course not even the properties of matter are matter, so after awhile it became hard to believe in matter itself. But by that time I was so disordered that I couldn't tell how disordered I was. I recognized that I had committed yet another incoherency, but I concluded that reality itself was incoherent, and that I was pretty clever to have figured this out even more so, because in an incoherent world, figuring didn't make sense either.

A seventh and reinforcing reason for nihilism was that for all of the other reasons, I had fallen under the spell of the nineteenth-century German writer Friedrich Nietzsche. I was, if anything, more Nietzschean than he was. Whereas he thought that given the meaninglessness of things, nothing was left but to laugh or be silent, I recognized that not even laughter or silence were left. One had no reason to do or not do anything at all. This is a terrible thing to believe, but like Nietzsche, I imagined myself one of the few who could believe such things who could walk the rocky heights where the air is thin and cold. But the main reason I was a nihilist, the reason that tied all these other reasons together, was sheer, mulish pride. I didn't want God to be God; I wanted J. Budziszewski to be God. I see that now. But I didn't see that then.

The Stupidity of the Intelligent

I have already said that everything goes wrong without God. This is true even of the good things He's given us, such as our minds. One of the good things I've been given is a stronger than average mind. I don't make the observation to boast; human beings are given diverse gifts to serve Him in diverse ways. The problem is that a strong mind that refuses the call

to serve God has its own way of going wrong. When some people flee from God they rob and kill. When others flee from God they do a lot of drugs and have a lot of sex. When I fled from God I didn't do any of those things; my way of fleeing was to get stupid. Though it always comes as a surprise to intellectuals, there are some forms of stupidity that one must be highly intelligent and educated to commit. God keeps them in his arsenal to pull down mulish pride, and I discovered them all. That is how I ended up doing a doctoral dissertation to prove that we make up the difference between good and evil and that we aren't responsible for what we do. I remember now that I even taught these things to students; now that's sin.

It was also agony. You cannot imagine what a person has to do to himself well, if you are like I was, maybe you can what a person has to do to himself to go on believing such nonsense. St. Paul said that the knowledge of God's law is "written on our hearts, our consciences also bearing witness." The way natural law thinkers put this is to say that they constitute the deep structure of our minds. That means that so long as we have minds, we can't not know them. Well, I was unusually determined not to know them; therefore I had to destroy my mind. I resisted the temptation to believe in good with as much energy as some saints resist the temptation to neglect good. For instance, I loved my wife and children, but I was determined to regard this love as merely a subjective preference with no real and objective value. Think what this did to very capacity to love them. After all, love is a commitment of the will to the true good of another person, and how can one's will be committed to the true good of another person if he denies the reality of good, denies the reality of persons, and denies that his commitments are in his control?

Visualize a man opening up the access panels of his mind and pulling out all the components that have God's image stamped on them. The problem is that they all have God's image stamped on them, so the man can never stop. No matter how much he pulls out, there's still more to pull. I was that man. Because I pulled out more and more, there was less and less that I could think about. But because there was less and less that I could think about, I thought I was becoming more and more focused. Because I believed things that filled me with dread, I thought I was smarter and braver than the people who didn't believe them. I thought I saw an emptiness at the heart of the universe

that was hidden from their foolish eyes. Of course I was the fool.

Escape Through Horror

How then did God bring me back? I came, over time, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself. Not exactly a feeling of guilt, not exactly a feeling of shame, just horror: an overpowering sense that my condition was terribly wrong. Finally it occurred to me to wonder why, if there were no difference between the wonderful and the horrible, I should feel horror. In letting that thought through, my mental censors blundered. You see, in order to take the sense of horror seriously and by now I couldn't help doing so I had to admit that there was a difference between the wonderful and the horrible after all. For once my philosophical training did me some good, because I knew that if there existed a horrible, there had to exist a wonderful of which the horrible was the absence. So my walls of self-deception collapsed all at once.

At this point I became aware again of the Savior whom I had deserted in my twenties. Astonishingly, though I had abandoned Him, he had never abandoned me. I now believe He was just in time. There is a point of no return, and I was almost there. I said I had been pulling out one component after another, and I had nearly got to the motherboard.

The next few years after my conversion were like being in a dark attic where I had been for a long time, but in which shutter after shutter was being thrown back so that great shafts of light began to stream in and illuminate the dusty corners. I recovered whole memories, whole feelings, whole ways of understanding that I had blocked out.

Of course I had to repudiate my dissertation. At the time I thought my career was over because I couldn't possibly retool, rethink, and get anything written and published before my tenure review came up, but by God's grace that turned out to be untrue.

Defending What I Had Denied

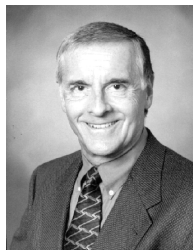
As an ethical and political theorist, what I do now is poles apart from what I did sixteen years ago. What I write about now is those very moral principles I used to deny the ones we can't not know because they are imprinted on our minds, inscribed upon our consciences, written on our hearts.

Some call these principles the "natural law." Such as it is, my own contribution to the theory of natural law is a little different than those of some other writers. One might say that I specialize in understanding the ways

that we pretend we don't know what we really do, the ways we suppress our knowledge, the ways we hold it down, the ways we deceive ourselves and others. I do not try to "prove" the natural law as though one could prove that by which all else is proven; I do try to show that in order to get anywhere at all, the philosophies of denial must always at some point assume the very first principles they deny. It is a matter of awe to me that God has permitted me to make any contribution at all. His promise is that if only the rebel turns to Jesus Christ in repentant faith, giving up claims of self-ownership and allowing this Christ the run of the house, He will redeem everything there is in it. Just so, it was through my rescue from self-deception that I learned about self-deception. He has redeemed even my nihilist past and put it to use.

Many of my students tell me they struggle with the same dark influences that I once did. I hope that by telling the story of my own escape I may encourage them to seek the light.

The Ultimate Commitment



John Dowdy, Jr.

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Commitment! The answer surprised me—not the content, but the source. The word was spoken by Jackie, one of four boys with whom I was walking on that Sunday morning. I considered it a mature response for a fourteen-year-old.

On that Sunday, I had decided to take a different approach in my Mission Arlington Bible study. It was a brisk November day, and junior high school boys get restless in a hurry when cooped up in a small room. So I suggested that we take a perambulatory approach. We could walk and learn. After all, Jesus Himself did much of His teaching while walking; and I'm sure His disciples had much longer attention spans than junior high boys.

I had begun the discussion with a question on the nature of love, curious to see what the response would be from youngsters who came from less than privileged backgrounds. Two of the boys, Jackie and Jordan both responded to the question. The other two boys were not as interested and their levels of attention seemed to ebb and flow. But at least they weren't being distractions, and maybe some of what was being said was finding fertile ground, even in their minds.

It was when Jackie talked of commitment that I knew he had more than a simple superficial understanding of love. Our discussion continued as we talked of God's love and how He makes His love personal to us when He came to us in Person in Jesus, His Son.

Poll takers occasionally conduct surveys of religious beliefs, and published results will show that an overwhelming majority of the populace have some belief in God. What people believe about Him sometimes gets confusing, however. It seems that some, while acknowledging His existence, do not really include God in their personal lives. They see Him as impersonal and unknowable. Therefore, to them, He is irrelevant or nonessential.

For the professing Christian, this is somewhat perplexing. Perhaps the attitudes of those who fail to believe in a loving, personal God can be explained by the way they treat the reality of suffering and injustice in the world in which they have to live. How can a loving God allow so much suffering and injustice to exist?

If one believes in a Divine Creator, who says that His creation is good, then suffering of children and injustices are difficult to reconcile with God's beauty and goodness. God's love and beauty tell us a great deal about our world. Divine love and beauty are extensions of God's character and personality. To say that we experience the giving and receiving of love, that we appreciate beauty, and that we oppose injustice—and that God doesn't—would be to say we have capabilities the Creator does not have. That doesn't even make good nonsense.

God created in us the capacity to experience the joy of beauty. Beauty is everywhere—sunrise, sunset, the grace of an animal, the majesty of mountains, the serenity of a deep forest, the music of a flowing stream. It can be found in the work of a gifted composer, poet or author.

Love is the work of God's hand as well. Any man or woman who loves, and who believes in God as Creator, has to conclude that love is part of His creation. He gave us love and the capacity to give and to receive it. Obviously, love comes in different contexts. The Greeks have a word for the friendship kind of love, another for the love between a man and woman. The most profound kind of love is expressed by the word *agape*, God's suffering love. It is the strongest word in any human language which speaks of God's love for us. This is the kind of love to which He is continually calling us to act out.

The Bible tells us that God took the initiative in creation (Gen. 1:1). He speaks creation into existence (Gen. 1:3-26). The Genesis account then relates God's creation of male and female, "in His own image" (Gen. 1:27). What does this mean? There is only one conclusion we can draw from Scripture; namely, that the Creator—infinite, holy, and perfect—created men and women for a relationship with Himself. This is not a description of an impersonal and an uncaring God.

If one believes in God, and accepts the fact that God is perfect, then it goes without saying that the love which He has extended to the human race is a product of

the perfect relationship God established with us in the beginning. To say that humanity can't understand this perfect love would be an understatement. Perhaps all God wanted was simply to walk with us in a garden. But then a malady called "sin" entered creation and the human race, and in sin humanity lost the capacity to give and understand God's love.

Sin can be called a disease. It became a part of humanity's condition early on, and it is debilitating to humanity. Unlike other diseases for which humans have discovered preventions and cures, this particular disease is incurable. We know very little about sin other than its symptoms. Even the Apostle Paul had little understanding of this malady, as evidenced by his quandary described in Romans 7:15-24. At the very least, Paul was constantly baffled by it even after he became a Christian. We don't really understand sin, even though we experience it, practice it openly, and suffer its consequences.

In light of all this, I wanted my Mission Arlington boys to realize that God is a God of surprises. He refused to leave us to our sin. Even though we lost the capacity to give and understand His perfect love, we have never lost our capacity to receive it. God's commitment, a commitment arising out of His perfect love for us, is to provide salvation for all of humanity through His Son (John 3:16).

Love necessitates a commitment, whether it's the love of one friend for another, the love of one spouse for another, the love between parents and children, or the love of God for us. Jackie was "right on" when he mentioned commitment as a characteristic of love. What greater commitment could be made than the commitment God made to us, to keep loving us and seeing the best in us, in spite of our worst? Love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Cor. 13:7 N.I.V.)

To make a commitment to a person means trusting that person to deal properly with that which is committed. The lover trusts the person who is loved to receive the love in the spirit in which it is offered. This "God-kind-of-love," of necessity, involves risk—the risk that the offered love could easily be rejected. The most painful experience a person can have is to be rejected by another. There are those among us who seem afraid to love someone for this very reason—the fear of rejection. Love makes one vulnerable. It lowers one's defenses and exposes us to the possibility of pain.

Commitment, as an indispensable element of suffer-

ing love, is irrevocably tied to vulnerability. Those who are capable of hurting us the most are those we love. Without such vulnerability, love loses its capacity to commit and loses its capacity to risk.

Since God's love is perfect and infinite and beyond our imagination, it must naturally follow that His pain is likewise measured infinitely when a person rejects His love and refuses to accept His Son. Yet, He loves us—compassionately, completely, infinitely, beyond all measure. God has given each of us a "shot at life." He has made known to us how much He loves us in sending us His Son, Jesus. At the same time, because He loves us, He has given each of us the freedom to accept or to reject Him.

It is here nonbelievers stumble. They fail to realize that human choice is necessary to the dynamic; because, unless the object of one's love is free to accept or to reject it, there is a real question as to whether or not it is love.

I have, since becoming a Christian, thought of commitment as being a step that only I took—by committing my life to Jesus. My focus on the subject has sometimes been unilateral, as if it was a one-way street. But God made a commitment to me before I ever even dreamed of making a commitment to Him. His commitment to all of humanity finds its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's sacrificial commitment to me before I ever knew Him, an expression of His suffering love!

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 N.I.V.). He committed His love for us. Now, this is truly remarkable! It is entirely consistent with God's activity throughout the history of sin and death. In the Bible, we have the record of God taking the initiative at every turn. God acts first, whether in creation or redemption. He does not wait for humanity to take the first step. He created us for a relationship with Himself. He has always been the first to reach out and establish the possibility of a relationship.

Before I knew my sinful condition was a detriment spiritually, God had made an ultimate commitment of love to me. This manifestation of God's love to a sinner such as John Dowdy, Jr. is beyond my comprehension. God's gracious love is magnificent and overwhelming. He really does consider me special, loveable, and worth saving! What's more, I am convinced that God actually wants my company!

God's love is not counterfeit, it is real. And when love is real, it must find expression. There is no other

way for love to be real. Since God is the Source of love, it had to follow that He would express His love to humanity, the objects of His love. God's love could only be finally and completely expressed in one way—by His gift of Himself to us.

The Person of Jesus Christ is the full and final expression of God's love for us. He became one of us. He was born of a woman, born into poverty under circumstances which caused many to question the legitimacy of His birth. He lived approximately thirty-three years, worked with His hands as a carpenter, and honored His father and mother. When He began His public ministry, it was as an obedient Son of His Heavenly Father. His public ministry lasted about three short years, followed by death on a Roman cross reserved for criminals. He was tempted, yet without sin. Did He have to die? I think the answer is "yes." On the cross, He became our substitute, taking upon Himself the sins of the world.

God's perfect, redeeming love had to find expression – and this was God's ultimate gift of love. He died for us, and in the process had a head-on collision with all the forces of hell itself – something I would have had to contend with had He not suffered there for me on the cross.

But the cross wasn't all there was to it. Death couldn't hold Him. God raised Him from the dead. Just as God's grace caused Him to go to the cross, God's grace caused Him to extend to us His resurrection life. God is a God of surprises.

Because God surprised all of us with the resurrection, He gives us real hope in a world filled with sin and injustice. While it is difficult to try to figure God out, it is equally difficult to try to figure out the crucified and resurrected One. Even today, people still can't figure Jesus out. Some modern theologians have begun to question certain things about "the historical Jesus." There is even a group called "The Jesus Seminar." It seems, superficially at least, to be a group of scholars who meet and take votes on the authenticity of the Gospels, trying to figure out what Jesus said or did not say, what He did or did not do. They apparently think they have more insight than the faithful.

What the members of The Jesus Seminar fail to see is that, because God doesn't do things the way we would, He doesn't always meet our expectations. They seem to be hung up, for example, on the fact that Jesus' post-resurrection appearances were only to believers, not to non-believers. Haven't they read

what Jesus said to Thomas, the apostle? "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (Jn. 20:29 N.I.V.).

Times haven't changed. If we can't make Jesus more like us, then our tendency is to back off and even reject Him. Humanity often refuses to accept the fact that God is going to be God, whether He matches up to our expectations or not. Our temptation is to persist in trying to recreate God in our own image.

The good news is that He meets our need. If we can't understand Him, so what? We don't have to, because He has given us the ability to receive His perfect love and salvation without understanding fully. He gives us a gift of faith that has the potential to lead us to understanding.

The real problem is God's love is very disturbing, if we really take Him seriously. It should cause us to live courageously. After all, Jesus has already set the example for courageous living. Jesus lived so courageously He was crucified. After His resurrection and ascension, He asked us, His disciples, to live at the point of risk.

Consider the risk

Humanity is always one generation away from total unbelief, unless our commitment is to faith and the telling of His story.

His Gospel is always at risk because there are those who would commit atrocities "in the name of Christ"; those who would justify their racist attitudes and violent activities and claim to be Christian. Manipulation and the use of intimidation, however subtle, often substitutes for the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

There are the instances that bring risk to the Gospel by those Christians who are ill-tempered, causing non-believers to be driven further away from His truth.

Sexual misconduct and financial dishonesty both bring embarrassment to the community of faith.

We would regularly put the Gospel at risk when we resort to the legalism from which our faith in Christ has set us free.

Accepting the watering down of His Gospel, making it "cheap grace" (D. Bonhoeffer), destroys commitment and distorts the expectations of the Gospel's hope.

While Jesus is a great teacher, there are those who stop there; failing to recognize that He is more than a teacher. He is the Christ of God's future hope for

humanity.

Risk! A necessary element that accompanies God's love. God's love necessarily extends God's risk. The risks of faith in my own life have led to intense spiritual struggles, as I have wrestled with doubt, questioning how a loving God could allow sin to get away with so much evil in the world He created. Intellectually, the risk of accepting God's love in Christ has sometimes provided the basis for ridicule from would-be friends, and has sometimes led to being misunderstood in the practice of law.

Genuine ministry takes place every day in the name of Christ, resulting in changed lives, mine included. The Gospel's critics and its detractors have denigrated the Christ, made fun of Him, and have even watered down and cheapened His message. Some have even tried to silence Him. But Jesus is just as alive and present today as when He rose from the dead two thousand years ago. He has shared His life with sinful humanity, committing Himself to us.

How can anybody, once confronted with the truth of God's love, miss out on Who He is and how He has come to us in Person in His Son? There had to be a reason for such a drastic act of redemption by the eternal God. He got my attention, and I've never been the same since.

It is only God's commitment of His love that ultimately redeems, reconciles, and provides the paradigm for living a life that is worth living. The cross of Christ epitomizes God's ultimate love, His sacrificial love, His suffering love for a sinful humanity, for Jackie and his friends, and even for me. Because of the changes He has brought about in us, there is the possibility to live sacrificial lives in trying to do some good in the world, encouraging others to live in peace. In God's ultimate commitment of love in Jesus Christ, He has gone as far as He can go in reaching out to establish relationship with each individual member of the human race. His purpose was to create eternal monuments in the changed lives of those to whom He has imparted His resurrection life and on whose hearts He has permanently written His words. Only the mind of God could conceive such a plan; and only God Himself could carry it out.

How do I respond to such love? By gratefully accepting it; and by humbly and prayerfully turning all of myself and all I understand over to Christ, trusting Him to daily transform me and change me in accordance with His will.

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