

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM[®] Text, Chapter 20, The Vision of Holiness

Section I, Holy Week

Section II, The Gift of Lilies

Legend:

Sans serif text = Material from ACIM 3rd edition (FIP)

Italic sans serif text = words emphasized in all caps in Urtext

Bold sans serif text = alternate or omitted material from the Urtext

Typewriter text = editorial comments

~~strikethrough sans serif text~~ = Not in Urtext, in FIP edition

Overview of the Section

The first two sections of Chapter 20 are really a continuation of the scenario presented in “The Lifting of the Veil” (T-19.IC(D).i). They were dictated in April, 1967, starting on Palm Sunday. They present the Course’s unique interpretation of what is known as “Holy Week” in the traditional church calendar—the week from Palm Sunday through the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the crucifixion, and the resurrection on Easter Sunday.¹ Here that week is seen as an allegory of the holy relationship surmounting the final obstacle and rising into life. It can also be seen as an allegory of our individual entry into union with God. Although the material can be applied more generally, and individually, the specific situation under consideration is that of two holy relationship partners standing before the final obstacle to peace, the fear of God. They are deciding whether or not to forgive one another completely, or to continue to wander in the darkness of their egos.

¹ Please note that I will be using the common sequencing of the final events of Jesus’ life here, although some biblical scholars believe that Jesus may have been crucified on Wednesday, rather than Friday.

Paragraph 1

1. ¹This is Palm Sunday², the celebration of victory and the *acceptance* of the truth. ²Let us not spend this holy week brooding on the crucifixion of God's Son, but happily in the celebration of his *release*. ³For Easter is the sign of peace, not pain. ⁴A slain Christ has no meaning. ⁵But a *risen* Christ becomes the symbol of the Son of God's forgiveness ~~on~~ **[upon]** *himself*, the sign he looks upon himself as healed and whole.

• Study Question •

1. *Paragraph 1 sets forth the Course's view of the Christian holy week. According to this paragraph, we should spend this week focusing on what?*
- A. *Palm Sunday.*
 - B. *Maundy Thursday.*
 - C. *Good Friday.*
 - D. *Holy Saturday.*
 - E. *Easter.*

In the first sentence, Jesus makes clear the symbolic meaning of Palm Sunday²: “the celebration of victory and the *acceptance* of the truth” (1:1). In our spiritual journey, it represents the holy instant in which we first accepted the truth about ourselves (and one another): that we, too, are the Christ. The Course asks us *not* to focus on the crucifixion, but rather to spend our time celebrating the acceptance of truth and the release from death represented by the resurrection (“his *release*”) (1:2). The focus should be on “peace, not pain” (1:3).

The Course's dismissal of the crucifixion (“A slain Christ has no meaning,” 1:4) is startling, given that the crucifixion has become the central focus of traditional Christianity, which credits the crucifixion as the source of salvation. Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman teaches that early Jewish Christians had difficulty explaining how the Messiah, who was expected to be a strong deliverer and warrior king, had been executed as a common criminal, and so, to rescue Jesus' reputation, they had to come up with an explanation of the crucifixion that made it a *good* thing. I mention this because, to me, it is confirmation of the Course's understanding, that the crucifixion is *not* the basis of salvation, and originally was never intended to be so.

² For anyone unfamiliar with the story of Jesus' last week before his resurrection, Palm Sunday is the celebration of Jesus' “triumphal entry” into the city of Jerusalem. He rode in on a donkey, people were laying palm fronds in his path and hailing him as a the King of the Jews. It was a moment of triumph. Even his enemies said, “The whole world has gone after him.” It was a moment in which Jesus was being acknowledged as the Christ—which is Who he really was.

The week continued with Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion (the latter occurring, traditionally, on Friday, known paradoxically as “Good” Friday), followed by his resurrection the following Sunday, which is commemorated as the Christian holy day known as Easter. “Maundy” Thursday commemorates the Last Supper and Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet (“Maundy” is an old English word, derived from the Latin for “foot washing”.)

The risen Christ, by contrast with “a *slain* Christ” (1:4), demonstrates that the Son of God (in this case the phrase *does* refer to Jesus, who had fully remembered his true Identity as the Son of God) had completely forgiven himself, and now perceived himself “as healed and whole” (1:5). There is a theological theory of salvation called “forensic justification,” which teaches that God “declared” the human race righteous based on Jesus’ death, much as a judge might pardon or acquit a person whose debt had been paid by someone else. Notice here that with the Course’s understanding of the resurrection, it is not a sign that *God* has done anything, or that Jesus has somehow changed God’s mind about his (or our) sins. Rather, it is a “symbol of the Son of God’s forgiveness upon *himself*.” Pay attention to the emphasis; not that God forgave him, but that *he* has forgiven *himself*. God has not changed. Nor has the Son of God changed anything except the way “he looks upon himself.”

Paragraph 2

2. ¹This week begins with palms and ends with lilies, the white and holy sign the Son of God is innocent. ²Let no dark sign [**signs**] of crucifixion intervene between the journey and its purpose; between the *acceptance* of the truth [Palm Sunday] and its *expression* [Easter]. ³This week we celebrate [**eternal**] life, *not* death. ⁴And we honor the perfect *purity* of the Son of God, and *not* his sins. ⁵Offer ~~your brother~~ [**each other**] the gift of lilies, *not* the crown of thorns; the gift of love and *not* the “gift” of fear. ⁶You stand beside ~~your brother~~ [**each other**], thorns in one hand and lilies in the other, uncertain which to give. ⁷Join now with me and throw away the thorns, offering the lilies to *replace* them. ⁸This Easter I would have the gift of your forgiveness offered by you to me, and *returned* by me to you. ⁹*We cannot* be united in crucifixion and in death. ¹⁰Nor can the resurrection be complete till *your* forgiveness rests on Christ, along with mine.

• Study Question •

2. *Let's say your friend tells a secret of yours he had agreed to keep confidential. What does giving him lilies mean in this case?*
- A. *Being honest with him about your feelings.*
 - B. *Forgiving him.*
 - C. *It means literally giving him flowers, as a peace offering.*
 - D. *It means giving him palms—using the palm of your hand to knock him in the face.*

Both Palm Sunday and Easter are celebrations of aspects of the same thing: “the *acceptance* of the truth” (1:1) or the change of perception by which we accept the truth about ourselves as healed and whole (1:5). Palms and lilies signify different aspects of the truth that “the Son of God is innocent” (2:1). Palm Sunday is the *acceptance* of the truth; Easter is the *expression* of the truth (2:2). Jesus here is asking us to literally *ignore* what,

historically, came in between: “Let no dark signs of crucifixion intervene between the journey (the acceptance) and its purpose” (the expression) (2:2). In other words, forget the crucifixion; focus on the truth that came before and after it. Celebrate life, not death (2:3). Making the crucifixion central emphasizes the supposed sinfulness of humanity, and fosters fear; the Course is calling on us to “honor the perfect *purity* of the Son of God” instead (2:4), which fosters love.

The way to do this is to forgive each other: give lilies, not thorns. Give compassion and mercy, not blame, attack, and punishment. Give love, not fear (2:5). Here we stand, with forgiveness in one hand and condemnation in the other, “uncertain which to give” (2:6). We offer each other thorns so many times, without even thinking twice and doing it consciously. We frown at each other’s “little” sins. We complain. We silently judge. We shake our heads. We gossip. Our heads are full of judgments about one another, some big judgments, some seemingly minor. None of them are minor; they are all thorns. We could take what W-pI.5.4:4 says about upsets and apply it to judgments: “There are no small *judgments*. They are all equally disturbing to my peace of mind.” Jesus asks us to *throw them away*, and to offer lilies of forgiveness in their place (2:7).

When we forgive one another, it is a gift to Jesus, which he can, and does, return to us. We forgive each other and receive forgiveness as well. What we are really doing, in forgiving one another, is forgiving *Christ*, because that is who your sister or brother really is. And this forgiveness does not first make sins real and then overlook them, which is what the common understanding is. Rather, it is a recognition of *sinlessness*. As the Course makes clear:

Those who are forgiven from the view their sins are real are pitifully mocked and twice condemned; first, by themselves for what they think they did, and once again by those who pardon them.

It is sin's unreality that makes forgiveness natural and wholly sane, a deep relief to those who offer it; a quiet blessing where it is received. It does not countenance illusions, but collects them lightly, with a little laugh, and gently lays them at the feet of truth. And there they disappear entirely (W-pI.134.5:5-6:3).

If you want a clear explanation of the difference between the common understanding of forgiveness and that of the Course, I recommend a careful reading of the entire Lesson 134 in the Workbook.

Paragraph 3

3. ¹A week is short, and yet this holy week is the symbol of the whole journey the Son of God has undertaken. ²He started with the sign of victory, the promise of the resurrection, *already* given him [Palm Sunday]. ³Let him not wander into the temptation of crucifixion, and *delay* him there. ⁴Help him to go in peace *beyond* it, with the light of his own innocence lighting his way to his redemption and release. ⁵Hold him not back with thorns and nails when his redemption is so near. ⁶But let the whiteness of your shining gift of lilies speed him on his way to resurrection [Easter].

• **Study Question** •

3. **Paragraph 3** states that *holy week* is a symbol of the Son of God's whole journey. Palm Sunday symbolized the beginning of the journey, in which the Son of God started out with the promise of resurrection already given him. What actual event, then, does Palm Sunday symbolize?
- A. The moment that you and your brother joined in a holy instant.
 - B. The original separation, which began your whole journey.
 - C. A point earlier in the life of Jesus in which he decided to begin the spiritual journey in earnest.
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Once again, the Course expounds of the symbolism of Holy Week, seeing it as “the symbol of the whole journey the Son of God has undertaken” (3:1). It is referring, not to our journey *away* from God, but our journey of *return*. This journey began in the holy instant that initiates a holy relationship, which is what Palm Sunday commemorates—the acceptance of the truth about each other, a recognition of a victory already ours (3:2). I believe that many if not most of us have already embarked on such a journey. If you are working on forgiveness in some relationship, or have in the past, in my opinion you are involved in a holy relationship. As we move through the journey, we are in the week in between Palm Sunday and Easter, during which we are tempted over and over to crucify one another, to nail each other to a cross or press a crown of thorns on each other.

So Jesus tells us not to wander into that temptation, which will only delay us (3:3). Rather, we are to help each other to go beyond such temptations, remembering the light of our own innocence, allowing it to move us toward resurrection, redemption, and release (3:4). Thorns and nails will only hold our brothers and sisters back; lilies will speed them on their way (3:5–6). Our desire for each other must always be to speed one another on the way to God, rather than to drag them down into condemnation, guilt, and death.

Paragraph 4

4. ¹Easter is not the celebration of the *cost* of sin, but of its *end*. ²If you see glimpses of the face of Christ behind the veil, looking between the snow white petals of the lilies you have received and *given* as your gift, you will behold ~~your brother's~~ **[each other's]** face and *recognize* it. ³I was a stranger and you took me in, not knowing who I was. ⁴Yet for your gift of lilies you *will* know. ⁵In your *forgiveness* of this stranger, alien to you and yet your ancient Friend, lies *his* release and *your* redemption *with* him. ⁶The time of Easter is a time of *joy*, and not of mourning. ⁷Look on your risen Friend, and celebrate his holiness along with me. ⁸For Easter is the time of your *salvation*, along with mine.

• **Study Question** •

4. **Paragraph 4** mentions many benefits that will come from your gift of lilies. Which of the following is not one of those benefits?
- A. Glimpsing the face of Christ.
 - B. Knowing Jesus.
 - C. Recognizing and releasing your brother.
 - D. The holy instant.
 - E. Your own redemption, your own salvation.

The traditional understanding of the cross and resurrection is that Jesus, by dying, paid the price of our sins. He was able to do so, in this view, because he was the unique Son of God, whose value as “God the Son” is immeasurable, and thus able to offset the horrible burden of the sins of all humanity for all time. This, clearly, is *not* the perspective of the Course. Rather than celebrating the *cost* of sin by focusing on Jesus’ death, it focuses on the *end* of sin—the recognition of the sinless Son of God in us all (4:1). As we offer lilies of forgiveness, sometimes we will catch “glimpses of the face of Christ behind the veil,” peeking through the lilies (4:2). We will see these glimpses in one another, and will recognize that the face we are seeing *is* the real face of our brothers and sisters.

Jesus then quotes himself from the Bible:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in” (Matthew 25:35 KJV)

Here (4:3) he says, “I was a stranger and you took me in, not knowing who I was.” The biblical quotation means just what the Course has been saying: When we open our hearts (and perhaps our doors) to another human being, receiving them with love, forgiveness, and acceptance, *we are taking in Christ*. In the New Testament, when the questioner asks, “When did we ever take you in?” the master replies:

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:39–40 NRSV)

The added thought here (4:4) is that, when we offer lilies (forgiveness), we *will* know who we have forgiven, because we will catch a glimpse of the face of Christ in our brother or sister. We are forgiving someone who seems to be a stranger to us but who is in reality “your ancient Friend.” This leads to both “*his* release and *your* redemption” (4:5). It’s a package deal. What I give I also receive. This is the way we both experience the resurrection, the keynote of Easter. We look on one another and celebrate one another’s holiness! What a joyful message! (4:6–8)

Section II, The Gift of Lilies

This section is a kind of summary of the fourth obstacle, with its imagery of the altar and the lilies. It reconsiders and dismisses the idea that the body is valuable for what it offers, and then concludes the symbolism of our choice between thorns and lilies with a powerful affirmation that, although we may be still unaware, that process has *already*

begun in us. If we look within carefully, we will see it, because we are no longer limited to our physical senses; we have already been given the vision of Christ.

Paragraph 1

1. ¹Look upon all the trinkets made to hang upon the body, or to cover it or for its use. ²See all the useless things made for its eyes to see. ³Think on the many offerings made for its pleasure, and remember all these were made to make seem lovely what you hate. ⁴Would you employ this hated thing to draw your brother to you, and to attract *his* body's eyes? ⁵Learn you but offer him a crown of thorns, not recognizing it for what it is, and trying to justify your *own* interpretation of its value by *his* acceptance. ⁶Yet still the gift proclaims his worthlessness to *you*, as his acceptance and delight acknowledges the lack of value *he* places on himself.

• Study Question •

5. *Let's say you meet someone new. What does it mean to give this new acquaintance thorns, in the specific the context of this paragraph?*
- A. *Condemning him for something he did.*
 - B. *Telling him to get lost.*
 - C. *Trying to attract him to you with a visually pleasing body.*
 - D. *A and B.*

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The body holds a powerful attraction for us, and we as a culture surely believe that the body has enormous powers. There is very convincing evidence all around us. Our televisions are full of commercials trying to sell us “all the trinkets made to hang upon the body” (1:1). Jewelry. Clothing. Hair products. Beauty products. Weight loss programs. And on and on.

We strive to make our bodies attractive, but we also seek out “offerings” to the body to bring it pleasure: food, sex, massages, hot tubs, gorgeous scenery, works of art...the Course is telling us here that “all these were made to make [the body] seem lovely,” yet the body is “what you hate” (1:2).

Why does the Course say we hate the body? The Course gives several reasons:

- because it keeps us separate
- because of what it sees and hears
- because it is frail and little
- because of some of the things our bodies do
- because it isn't good enough to be our home
- because we project our guilt onto it³

³ "You send it forth to seek for separation and be separate. And then you hate it, not for what it is, but for the uses you have made of it. You shrink from what it sees and what it hears, and hate its frailty and littleness. And you despise its acts, but not your own" (T-28.VI.3:2-5).

So, let's accept the idea that we hate our bodies. Then why on earth do we try so hard to "make seem lovely what you hate" (1:3)? Apparently, we are trying to attract another person (1:4). (Perhaps Helen was trying to beautify herself to attract Bill? There seem to be sexual overtones in some of what she wrote, but if that is the case it was doomed to failure because Bill was gay.) Jesus asks us to consider what our attempt says about how little we think of the person we are trying to attract (offering him something *we* hate!), and "the lack of value *he* places on himself" if he accepts and delights in your hateful gift (1:6). In fact, we are hoping that if the other person values our body, it will increase its value in our own eyes (1:5). But what we are really doing is offering a crown of thorns, dragging him or her down to share our own sense of worthlessness.

Paragraph 2

2. ¹Gifts are not made through bodies, if they be truly given and received. ²For bodies can neither offer nor accept; hold out nor take. ³Only the mind can value, and only the mind decides on what it would receive and give. ⁴And every gift it offers depends on what it *wants*. ⁵It will adorn its chosen home most carefully, making it ready to *receive* the gifts it wants by offering them to those who come unto its chosen home, or those it would *attract* to it. ⁶And there they will exchange their gifts, offering and receiving what their minds judge to be worthy of them.

• Study Question •

6. *Which of the following situations most accurately reflects what this paragraph is talking about?*
- A. *Someone has an incredible house, with a beautiful yard and hot tub, a great wine collection, awesome sound system, and wonderful furniture—all in order to attract a mate.*
 - B. *Someone has a body that has been carefully adorned, with just the right clothing, make-up, hair, jewelry, shoes, etc.—all in order to attract a mate.*
 - C. *Someone has an incredible mind, with lots of knowledge, practical know-how and a vast remembered library of jokes—all in order to attract a mate.*
 - D. *All of the above.*

The Course presents an interesting theory about giving here. The opening line pretty much negates everything we've ever known about giving: "Gifts are not made through bodies" (2:1). Our initial reaction might be: "What other possible way of giving a gift is there?" The only way I can give you a material gift is through our bodies. Oh, I may be able to give you a monetary gift by electronic transfer of funds from one bank to another,

"Yet the ego hates the body, because it cannot accept it as good enough to be its home" (T-4.V.4:4).

"You have displaced your guilt to your body from your mind. Yet a body cannot be guilty, for it can do nothing of itself. You who think you hate your body deceive yourself. You hate your mind, for guilt has entered into it, and it would remain separate from your brother's, which it cannot do" (T-18.VI.2:5-8).

but somewhere in there, my body has to initiate that transfer, and your body must act to receive it. So clearly, he is not talking about *material* gifts. *True* giving and receiving, Jesus asserts, is non-material (2:2). Bodies cannot truly offer a gift or receive one (2:3); only the mind can choose to give or to receive, because only the mind *values*.

What the mind values, or wants, determines what kind of gifts it will offer (2:4). And what the mind values, in turn, depends on what it chooses to be its home, or what kind of home it believes is *worthy* of being its home. If the mind believes the body is its home, it will adorn the body (as discussed in paragraph 1) in an attempt to attract the bodies of others that it wants (2:5). It will offer gifts of the body to attract gifts of the body from others.

What kind of gifts are *you* offering, and what does that tell you about what you think is your home, and about what you consider to be worthy of you?

Perhaps a concrete example may help to grasp the full import of what this teaching can mean to us. Most of us have known of couples in which one partner is abusive toward the other partner, and yet, despite repeated abuse, the “victim” chooses to remain in the relationship. Often, someone will tell them, “You deserve better than this.” Yet they don’t seem to hear, because in their own mind, for whatever reason, they really don’t think they *are* worthy of anything better. Their choice of what “gifts” they want to receive betrays their very low self-esteem.

The gifts we attract others to give to us betray how worthy we think we are. They reveal a lot about what we think of ourselves. That is what Jesus begins to state plainly in the next paragraph.

Paragraph 3

3. ¹Each gift is an *evaluation* of the receiver *and the giver*. ²No one but sees his chosen home as an altar to *himself*. ³No one but seeks to *draw* to it the worshippers of what he placed *upon* it, making it *worthy* of their devotion. ⁴And each has set a light upon his altar, that they may see what he has placed upon it and take it for their own. ⁵Here is the value that you lay upon your brother and on *yourself*. ⁶Here is your gift to *both*; your judgment on the Son of God for what he is. ⁷Forget not that it is *your* savior to whom the gift is offered. ⁸Offer him thorns and *you* are crucified. ⁹Offer him lilies and it is *yourself* you free.

• **Study Question** •

7. **Paragraph 3** is meant to apply to giving your brother thorns or lilies. Let's say you are giving him thorns. What do the following words refer to in this case?
- A. The "chosen home" is _____.
 - B. The "altar" is _____.
 - C. The "light" set on the altar (this is the most speculative one) is _____.
 - D. The "thorns" are _____.

The general idea is that what we value reveals a lot about what we think of ourselves and one another (3:1). I will perceive the home I choose as "an altar to [myself]" (3:2). We can see this exemplified in the actual, physical homes that people choose to live in. We choose them and decorate them according to how we think of ourselves. We want them to represent us to the world. The same is true of our *mental* homes. If the home we choose is our body, we adorn our bodies accordingly, seeking to draw to it "worshippers" (3:3). If the home we choose is our divine Self (or God), we will set out a very different set of gifts to offer to others.

Both ways, the gifts we offer tell us "the value that you lay upon your brother and on yourself" (3:5). "Thorns" or "lilies" symbolize the two sets of gifts we offer. If we evaluate another as unworthy of love, and offer judgment and condemnation, we are offering thorns—and we will be crucified (3:8). If we offer forgiveness and love, we are offering lilies—and "it is *yourself* you free" (3:9).

The picture being drawn here—laying out gifts on the altar, setting up a light to display them so that others can see and take the gifts—reminds me of the displays in a department store. What would it be like if the gifts I set out on display were lilies of forgiveness? What if my advertising slogan was, "Forgiveness offered here!" Perhaps you have encountered people like that, people who "give off" a forgiving message, people you would call "a soft place to land." That's what we are being called to be. And if that is what we offer to others, it is what we will receive.

Paragraph 4

4. ¹I have great need for lilies, for the Son of God has not forgiven me. ²And can I offer *him* forgiveness when he offers thorns to me? ³For he who offers thorns to anyone is against me still, and who is whole *without* him? ⁴Be you his friend for me, that I may be forgiven and you may look upon the Son of God as whole. ⁵But look you first upon the altar in your chosen home, and see what you have laid upon it to offer me. ⁶If it be thorns whose points gleam sharply in a blood-red light, the body is your chosen home and it is separation that you offer me. ⁷And yet the thorns are gone. ⁸Look you still closer at them now, and you will see your altar is no longer what it was.

• **Study Question** •

8. **Paragraph 4** says we have not yet forgiven Jesus. It says, “For he who offers thorns to anyone is against me still....” Is it possible, then, to love Jesus and not love everyone? Why or why not?
- A. We can love Jesus and still hate others. This paragraph is simply saying that the Sonship as a whole has not forgiven him. However, certain people have forgiven him and do love him, even if they don't love everyone else as yet.
 - B. If you offer thorns to anyone you must be threatened by Jesus' perfect love. You thus will fear him, even if you think you love him.
 - C. If you offer thorns to anyone you cannot truly and totally love anyone, including Jesus.
 - D. B and C.

When Jesus says he has “great need for lilies,” my first thought was that he had great need for us to offer one another lilies of forgiveness, but the second phrase—“for the Son of God has not forgiven me”—makes it clear that he is asking us to forgive *him* (4:1). Then, he implies that we cannot really experience forgiveness from him because we are still offering him thorns, instead of lilies (4:2). Exactly how, though, are we unforgiving of Jesus?

When we withhold forgiveness from (offer thorns to) anyone, we are withholding forgiveness from Jesus; we are “against me still,” he says (4:3). We have already been told that we receive what we give, so the overall effect of what is said here is the same. The additional factor here is that the way we treat one another is reflected in the way we treat Jesus. This makes sense to me because we are all connected. As he told us in the Gospels, do it to anyone and you've done it to me. The Sonship cannot be whole while anyone is being excluded (4:4), so unforgiveness toward *anyone* is a denial of that Wholeness. It affects not just that one person, it affects everyone.

He asks us to look at the altar in our chosen home to see what kind of gifts we are offering: thorns, or lilies (4:5)? If we see the thorns of unforgiveness, judgment and attack, “the body is your chosen home, and it is separation that you offer me” (4:6). But, strangely, no matter what we *think* we see, Jesus assures us that “the thorns are gone” (4:7). He asks us to take a “still closer” look. The altar (and its gifts) aren't the same any more. A miraculous change has taken place: despite what we think we see, the thorns are gone! Because we have embarked on this journey, the belief in sin (which is the root of the thorns) has been uprooted; God's peace has replaced it.

This is explained in more detail in the following paragraph.

Paragraph 5

5. ¹You look still with the body's eyes, and they *can* see but thorns. ²Yet you have asked for *and received* another sight. ³Those who accept the Holy Spirit's purpose as their own share also His vision. ⁴And what enables Him to see His purpose shine forth from every altar now is yours as well as His. ⁵He sees *no* strangers; only dearly loved and loving friends. ⁶He sees no thorns but only lilies, gleaming in the gentle glow of peace that shines on everything He looks upon and loves. ⁶Listen and hear this carefully, nor think it but a dream, a careless thought to play with, or a toy you would pick up from time to time and then put by. ⁷For if you do, so will it be to you.

• Study Question •

9. *How is it possible that the vision of the Holy Spirit sees no strangers or thorns, in a world full of strangers and thorns?*
- A. *His vision is extremely naive.*
 - B. *His vision focuses only on people you already know, and on their loving gifts (lilies).*
 - C. *His vision does not see anything physical, anything the body's eyes see.*

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If our vision is limited to the body's eyes, we see only the physical evidence—what a person does, how he or she acts, or what he or she says (I believe “the body's eyes” is a synecdoche⁴ for all the physical senses). As the Course has already said, the physical senses cannot perceive the invisible spirit, nor even the buried obstacles the ego inserts to obscure it⁵. All that the body's eyes can see are thorns, that is, signs of sin, causes for guilt and judgment (5:1).

However, we are *not* limited to what the physical senses show us. We have asked for, and have received, “another sight” (5:2). Lesson 313 in the Workbook is an example of a prayer for vision:

LESSON 313

Now let a new perception come to me.

1. ¹ *Father, there is a vision which beholds all things as sinless, so that fear has gone, and where it was is love invited in.* ² *And love will come wherever it is asked.* ³ *This vision is Your gift.* ⁴ *The eyes of Christ look on a world forgiven.* ⁵ *In His sight are all its sins forgiven, for He sees no sin in anything He looks upon.* ⁶ *Now let His true perception come to me, that I may waken from the dream of sin and look*

⁴ *synecdoche*—a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole of something

⁵ "There are no messages that speak of what lies underneath, for it is not the body that could speak of this. Its eyes perceive it not; its senses remain quite unaware of it; its tongue cannot relay its messages" (T-18.IX.3:5-6).

within upon my sinlessness, which You have kept completely undefiled upon the altar to Your holy Son, the Self with Which I would identify.

2. ¹ Let us today behold each other in the sight of Christ. ² How beautiful we are! ³ How holy and how loving! ⁴ Brother, come and join with me today. ⁵ We save the world when we have joined. ⁶ For in our vision it becomes as holy as the light in us.

This is a prayer we should pray daily, or one like it. Whenever we are tempted to look with judgment on someone, we can ask, “Now let a new perception come to me,” or “Now let Christ’s true perception come to me.” We can literally share the vision of the Holy Spirit, or, as Chapter 14.VII puts it, we can share perception with the Holy Spirit.⁶ If we “have accepted His plan as the one function that [we] would fulfill” (T-20.IV.8:4) we begin to see things differently (5:3)—very differently!

As the ego would limit your perception of your brothers to the body, so would the Holy Spirit release your vision and let you see the Great Rays shining from them, so unlimited that they reach to God (T-15.IX.1:1).

The Holy Spirit sees His own purpose, like Great Rays of light, “shining forth from every altar,” from within every person, and He *shares that vision with us* who share His purpose (5:4). Looking with this spiritual vision, nobody is a stranger to us; everyone is a “dearly loved and loving” friend (5:5)! The Holy Spirit does not see sins (thorns) “but only lilies” (offerings of forgiveness), and He looks on everything with love (5:6).

I find I need to remind myself of this notion every now and then: “There are no strangers; everyone is a dearly loved friend.” If you have ever met someone for the first time who treats *you* like a long-lost friend, you can imagine the impact it would have of treating *others* like this all the time.

Paragraph 6

6. ¹This Easter, look with *different* eyes upon ~~your brother~~ **[each other]**. ²You *have* forgiven me. ³And yet I cannot *use* your gift of lilies while you see them not. ⁴Nor can *you* use what I have given unless you *share* it. ⁵The Holy Spirit’s vision is no idle gift, no plaything to be tossed about a while and laid aside.

⁶ "The vision of Christ is not for Him alone, but for Him with you. Bring, therefore, all your dark and secret thoughts to Him, and look upon them with Him. He holds the light, and you the darkness. They cannot coexist when Both of you together look on them. His judgment must prevail, and He will give it to you as you join your perception to His.

Joining with Him in seeing is the way in which you learn to share with Him the interpretation of perception that leads to knowledge. You cannot see alone. Sharing perception with Him Whom God has given you teaches you how to recognize what you see" (T-14.VII.6:7-7:3).

• **Study Question** •

10. *This paragraph has one very simple point. Please state this main point in less than ten words.*

The “different eyes” we are asked to use when looking upon each other are the eyes of Christ, or of the Holy Spirit.

Through the **eyes of Christ**, only the real world exists and only the real world can be seen. As you decide so will you see. (T-12.VII.11:7-8).

Give me your blessing, holy Son of God. I would behold you with the **eyes of Christ**, and see my perfect sinlessness in you (W-pI.161.11:7-8).

And while we still remain outside the gate of Heaven, let us look on all we see through holy vision and the **eyes of Christ**. Let all appearances seem pure to us, that we may pass them by in innocence, and walk together to our Father's house as brothers and the holy Sons of God (W-pII.263.2:1-2).

Jesus, rather than asking us to forgive him, declares that we have already done so (6:2). Nevertheless, he says he cannot *use* our gift of forgiveness (lilies) as long as *we* do not see them (6:3). I believe what he means here is “as long as you do not see lilies in your brother or sister, rather than thorns.” Likewise, we can't experience forgiveness until we share it with others. In other words, our mutual forgiveness is what unleashes the forgiveness from Jesus for us. You know you are forgiven when you forgive your brother. Your brother/sister knows God has forgiven them when *you* offer forgiveness to them, seeing them as pure and innocent with Christ's vision.

This revolutionary vision is not something you can use selectively, trying it out here or there, then setting it aside when it is “convenient” because you want to retain a particular grievance (6:5–7). It takes real commitment. It means aligning yourself with the Holy Spirit's purpose to forgive the entire world, to bring in the Kingdom of Heaven, “wherein are earth and Heaven joined as one” (W-pI.182.4:6). When you forgive, “you hold the key that opens Heaven's gate, and brings the Love of God the Father down to earth at last, to raise it up to Heaven” (W-pI.193.13:5).

As you read the next paragraph, read it with this in mind, taking it very seriously. Apply each sentence to yourself, inserting your name where it says “you,” if that works for you. Realize you are being called to join a great crusade with Jesus (T-1.III.1:6) to bring Heaven to earth.

Paragraph 7

7. ¹You have the vision now to look past *all* illusions. ²It has been given you to see no thorns, no strangers and *no* obstacles to peace. ³The fear of God is *nothing* to you now. ⁴Who is afraid to look upon illusions, *knowing* his savior stands beside him? ⁵*With* him, your vision has become the greatest power for the *undoing* of illusion that God Himself could give. ⁶For what God gave the Holy Spirit, *you* have received. ⁷The Son of God looks unto *you* for his release. ⁸For you have asked for *and been given* the strength to look upon this final obstacle, and see no thorns nor nails to crucify the Son of God, and crown him king of death.

• Study Question •

11. *Paragraph 7* gives the resounding message that we have received vision. What a joyous message! Yet it doesn't seem like we have it. How do you explain this?

- A. *This paragraph was written for people who are already in the real world and see the world through the eyes of Christ.*
- B. *This paragraph was written for Helen and Bill, who had entered a holy relationship. Not all readers of this paragraph may have accepted vision as yet.*
- C. *You may have received vision without yet deciding to really use it. This paragraph is an implicit plea to start using it.*
- D. *This paragraph is wrong.*
- E. *B and C.*
- F. *A and D.*

•

Having opened your mind to the Holy Spirit, even if just once, you have been given a gift. You are able to share his vision of the world, if you choose to do so (7:1). You can see past “*all* illusions.” All! You can overlook the illusion of “thorns,” the illusion of guilt that the ego wants to see in everyone. You can overlook the illusion of “strangers,” the illusion that your brother or sister is separate from you, different from you, other than you. You can overlook the illusion of “obstacles to peace”: that God is fearful; that death is desirable; that pain is attractive; that the body is valuable for what it offers; that peace is undesirable. No thorns, no strangers, no obstacles (7:2).

You *have* the ability to see through all of these illusions. This is the central message of the whole paragraph. The key is looking “*with him*” (7:5), with “his savior . . . beside” you (7:4). If we look at ourselves and the world in companionship with the Holy Spirit, our “vision has become the greatest power for the *undoing* of illusion that God Himself could give” (7:5). That’s a truly amazing statement! Whatever has been given to the Holy Spirit, *we* now have (7:6). We are here to release the Son of God, and we are capable of doing it (7:7). What a high calling has been given to us! Having dared to approach the final obstacle, the fear of God, we have “*been given*” the strength to look on it (7:8) and

to realize that it “is *nothing*” to us (7:3). All the illusions of thorns and nails have disappeared, and we no longer see them (7:8).

Paragraph 8

8. ¹Your chosen home is on the other side, *beyond* the veil. ²It has been carefully prepared for you, and it is ready to receive you now. ³You will not see it with the body's eyes. ⁴Yet all you need you have. ⁵Your home has called to you since time began, nor have you ever failed entirely to hear. ⁶You heard, but knew not *how* to look, nor *where*. ⁷And now you *know*. ⁸In you the knowledge lies, ready to be unveiled and freed from all the terror [the fear of God] that kept it hidden. ⁹There is no fear in love. ¹⁰The song of Easter is the glad refrain the Son of God was *never* crucified. ¹¹Let us lift up our eyes together, not in fear but *faith*. ¹²And there *will* be no fear in us, for in our vision will be *no* illusions; only a pathway to the open door of Heaven, the home we share in quietness and where we live in gentleness and peace, as one together.

• Study Question •

12. *Earlier, this section spoke of the body as our chosen home. Now, this paragraph is speaking of a different chosen home, clearly an alternative to the body. What is the chosen home spoken of here?*

- A. *The world.*
- B. *The real world.*
- C. *The holy relationship.*
- D. *The space before the veil.*
- E. *Heaven.*

•

Our home is “on the other side, *beyond* the veil” (8:1). Remember what is on the other side of the veil: the face of Christ, shining with joy, basking in the light of God's love. Christ lives *in God*, as we do; that is our true home. He calls it our *chosen* home, because, in choosing to align with the Holy Spirit, we have made that choice. The phrase, “beyond the veil,” is often used to refer to what lies on the other side of death, unseen from this world. This home, too, is unseen by the body's eyes (8:3), but rather than being after death, it is the place of resurrection, of life. It is the place Jesus was speaking of in John 14:2, when he said, “I am going to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2 REB), and it is ready now to receive us (8:2).

Although our eyes cannot see it, we already have the vision we need (8:4). It has been calling to us “since time began” (8:5). We know now *how* to look, and *where* (8:6–7). Where is it? It is *within us!* “For what attracts you from beyond the veil is also deep within you, unseparated from it and completely one” (T-19.IV.7:7).

This is the message in Robert Burns' inspiring poem, *Paracelsus*:

TRUTH is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fullness; and around,
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it, and makes all error: and, to KNOW,
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without.

We are seeking to release “the imprisoned splendour.” “In you the knowledge lies, ready to be unveiled and freed” (8:8). The fear of God “kept it hidden,” but now that obstacle has been removed. “There *is* no fear in love” (8:9). Crucifixion was illusion; it never happened (8:10). The Son of God never sinned. There was no death penalty. The separation never happened⁷. Together with one another and with Jesus, we can lift our eyes in faith, without any fear entering into the picture. Fear comes only from belief in illusions, and—if we can accept it—the illusions are gone (8:11–12). Take a deep breath! The pathway is open before us, the door to Heaven stands open to our home, “the home we share in quietness and where we live in gentleness and peace, as one together.”

I know that for me, and I believe for you as well, I need to spend time in meditation on thoughts such as this, visualizing the pathway *home* stretching out before me, clear of all obstacles, the light of Heaven shining through the open doorway. Rather than focusing on the four obstacles, let me focus on their *disappearance*. Let me see that “the way to God is through forgiveness *here*.”

"The way to God is through forgiveness here. There is no other way....God is our goal; forgiveness is the means by which our minds return to Him at last" (W-pII.256.1:1-2, 9).

Paragraph 9

9. ¹Would you not have your holy brother lead you there? ²His innocence will light your way, offering you its guiding light and sure protection, and shining from the holy altar within him where you laid the lilies of forgiveness. ³Let him be to you the savior from illusions, and look on him with the new vision that looks upon the lilies and brings *you* joy. ⁴We go beyond the veil of fear, lighting each other's way. ⁵The holiness that leads us is *within* us, as is our home. ⁶So will we find what we were *meant* to find by Him Who leads us.

⁷ "The full awareness of the Atonement, then, is the recognition that *the separation never occurred*." (T-6.II.10:7).

• **Study Question** •

13. *What does it mean for your brother to lead you home? How does he lead you there?*
- A. *He does not necessarily lead you there consciously. His innocence leads you there, and you can see this innocence however unenlightened he may be.*
 - B. *What lights your way are the lilies of forgiveness you offered him, not so much anything he says or does.*
 - C. *We light each other's ways, and just as you gave him lilies, he must lead you by giving lilies (gifts of forgiveness) to you.*
 - D. *All of the above.*

How do we get home? *We lead each other there* (9:1). Remember: "The Ark of Peace is entered two by two" (T-20.IV.6:5). As I perceive the innocence in you, it lights my way home. But for that light to shine, I have to lay lilies of forgiveness on your holy altar (9:2). I have to see past all the illusions of your guilt. When I see *your* innocence, it saves me from *my* illusions (9:3). What brings me joy is seeing *you* innocent (9:3). I release you, and you release me; we light each other's way (9:4). This is why it takes two. It isn't that one person brings salvation to someone else, it is that two bring it to each other.

We are being led by the holiness that is within us. It is leading us to our home, which is *also* within us (9:5). We are already one with our home. Nothing is being added to us from outside; the light is coming from *inside*. *We will* find what we were *meant* to find (9:6). There is a certain inevitability about the message the Course presents. It is "just" our true nature working itself out. It is the upward thrust of the evolution of consciousness that is the human race. Love is the force that underlies everything. The universe is biased in our favor.

Paragraph 10

10. ¹This is the way to Heaven and to the peace of Easter, in which we join in glad awareness that the Son of God is risen from the past, and has awakened to the present. ²Now is he free, unlimited in his communion with all that is within him. ³Now are the lilies of his innocence untouched by guilt, and perfectly protected from the cold chill of fear and withering blight of sin alike. ⁴Your gift has saved him from the thorns and nails, and his strong arm is free to guide you safely through them and *beyond*. ⁵Walk with him now rejoicing, for the savior from illusions has come to greet you, and lead you home with *him*.

• **Study Question** •

See combined question following Paragraph 11.

This is the way to God, the way to Heaven: forgiveness here, in this world. This is the real celebration of Easter, the recognition of awakening (10:1). When we move past the

obstacle of the fear of God we come alive. We, and our brothers and sisters that we've forgiven, are "free, unlimited in [our] communication with all that is within [us]" (10:2). Through forgiveness we have liberated the Son of God. We have removed his guilt (10:3), removed all belief in punishment and unworthiness, and in so doing we have released "his strong arm...to guide [us] safely through them [the thorns and nails] and *beyond*" (10:4). We have unleashed the Christ in each other. The person beside us has become our "savior from illusions," who will "lead you home with *him*" (10:5).⁸

This is what forgiveness can do. This is why the Course lays so much emphasis on it.

Paragraph 11

11. ¹Here is your savior and your friend, *released* from crucifixion through *your* vision, and free to lead you now where *he* would be. ²He will not leave you, nor forsake the savior in **[from {due to?}] his** pain. ³And gladly will ~~you and your brother~~ **[you]** walk the way of innocence together, singing as you behold the open door of Heaven and *recognize* the home that called to you. ⁴Give joyously to ~~your brother~~ **[one another]** the freedom and the strength to lead you there. ⁵And come before ~~his~~ **[each other's]** holy altar where the strength and freedom wait, to offer and receive the bright awareness that leads you home. ⁶The lamp is lit in ~~you for your brother~~ **[both of you, for one another]**. ⁷And by the hands that ~~gave it to him~~ **[each other]** shall you be led past fear to love.

• Study Question •

14. *These last two paragraphs portray a stirring vision of you and your brother leading each other home. Please place the following things in their proper order, based on these two paragraphs:*

- A. *You and your brother walk together, leading each other home.*
- B. *You and your brother see the open door of Heaven and walk through it.*
- C. *You forgive your brother.*
- D. *Your brother is free to guide you past thorns and onto home.*
- E. *Your brother is saved from thorns and nails.*

Sometimes we hear people talking about how another person is their teacher or savior because they present them with problems to solve or offenses to overlook and forgive. You get the idea that the job of a person as your savior is to push your buttons. But that isn't the way the Course presents it. Your savior is someone whom you have already forgiven who is now ready to "lead you now where *he* would be" (11:1). This is someone

⁸ "You first forgive, then pray, and you are healed. Your prayer has risen up and called to God, Who hears and answers. You have understood that you forgive and pray but for yourself. And in this understanding you are healed. In prayer you have united with your Source, and understood that you have never left. This level cannot be attained until there is no hatred in your heart, and no desire to attack the Son of God" (S-3.IV.4:1-6).

who can bring forgiveness to you, not require it from you. This is someone who knows that you have saved them from *their* pain, and therefore is determined to return the favor; this is someone who will never forsake you (11:2). The two of you will “walk the way of innocence together, singing” in shared recognition that the way to Heaven is open, and that the home you each seek is the same home (11:3). The one who saves you derives his or her strength *from you* as you give it to them, as you recognize them for the savior that they are (10:4). You must be willing to give, but also to receive (10:5). “The lamp is lit in both of you, for one another” (10:6). Hand in hand, you lead one another home, “past fear to love” (10:7).

The Course’s vision of the way of salvation is a powerfully *mutual* path. We need one another. It is the light in me that leads you home, and it is the light in you that leads me home. It makes such sense to me, if the ultimate goal is Oneness. If the problem is the illusion of separation, then the answer must be a coming together, a joining. May we all join in the highest form of prayer, according to *The Song of Prayer*:

There is little more to learn before the journey is complete. Now can you say to everyone who comes to join in prayer with you:

I cannot go without you, for you are a part of me.

And so he is in truth. Now can you pray only for what you truly share with him. For you have understood he never left, and you, who seemed alone, are one with him (S-1.V.3:7-12).

• **Study Question** •

15. Please summarize the main themes of these two sections in a paragraph or less. You may focus on those themes that were most personally meaningful to you, but at least include the thorns/lilies theme.

•

Answer Key

1. E

2. B

3. A

4. D

5. C

6. B

7. A. body
 B. body
 C. ways that bodily gifts are revealed, showcased, perhaps physical light.
 D. bodily gifts.

8. D

9. C

10. Vision is not an idle gift. Use it!

11. E

12. E

13. D

14. C, E, D, A, B.

15. Celebrate holy week by giving your brother lilies of forgiveness, not thorns of crucifixion. If the body is your chosen home you will give your savior its gifts, which are thorns. But you joined with him and so accepted the vision that sees only lilies. Give these to him and his holiness will lead you to your new chosen home, Heaven.