

Set The Captives Free

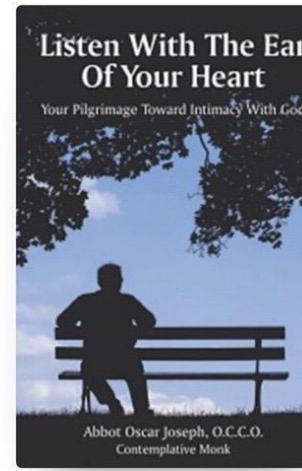
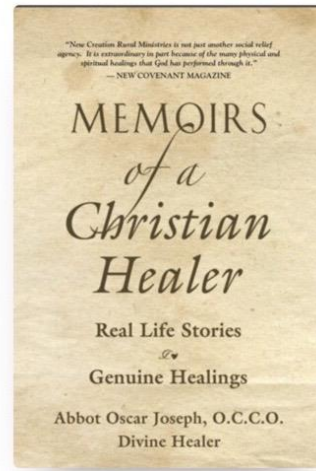
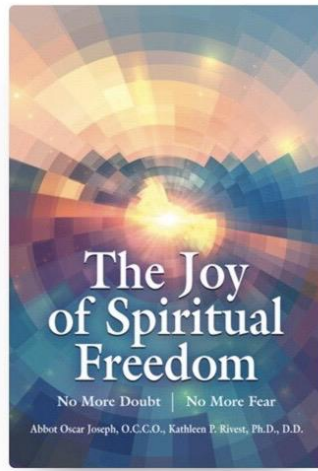
*"God himself will set me free
from the hunter's snare."*

*"From those who would trap me
with lying words and from the hunter's snare."*

By

The Most Rev. Abbot Oscar Joseph, Ph.D., D.S.T., OCCO

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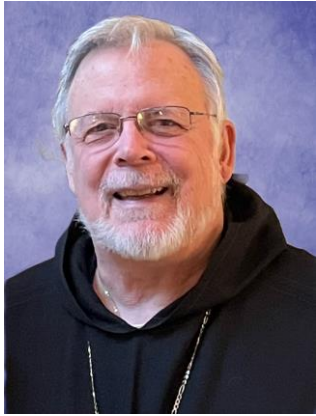
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Abbot Oscar Joseph, OCCO, is a Cistercian bishop and the head of his order for a quarter of a century. He holds a M.S. in Education, doctorates in Sacred Theology (Scripture) and Christian Counseling, and several honorary degrees. He is also a writer, teacher, counselor, spiritual guide, healer, and media personality. He became a priest in 1993 and worked as a pastor of a local conservative Anglican Church. He taught various subjects at community colleges. He established the St. Matthew's Institute for Healing and Intention Growth, a counseling center, and the St. Stephen Harding Theological College and Seminary. He has authored several books on spirituality, such as *Memoirs of a Christian Healer*, *The Joy of Spiritual Freedom*, and *Listen with the Ear of Your Heart*.

He has been a prominent figure in the Benedictine movement in the US and has offered spiritual direction and healing services to hundreds of people for over three decades. He has been on TV and radio shows to share his wisdom and stories. He retired from his counseling practice in 2019 and now focuses on his duties with Cistercian Order and leading healing services, retreats, and seminars.

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"God himself will set me free from the hunter's snare." From those who would trap me with lying words and from the hunter's snare."

Set the Captives Free

About 40 years ago, when I received my first Infusion from our Good Lord charged me to set the captives free, Is. 61. At that time, I thought the mission was only for the rural poor of Central NY, with whom I was currently working.

Years later, I moved to North Carolina and offered Christian counseling to a different group, some even wealthy, including local and national leaders. I was setting them free from imprisonment and pointing the road to spiritual freedom.

For 25 years, I have offered spiritual freedom to those seeking intimacy with God by living a monastic life.

So, what entrapments hold even sincere monastics back from true intimacy with God? Why can't we readily see them, and where did they come from?

There is much to say about these entrapments. I can only discuss a limited number of things in this PowerPoint presentation. Still, my books will help you develop a fuller understanding and create your escape plan.

Hang on, I am going deep into situations we have all struggled with and might still be struggling with. I will also teach how to be set free from those situations.



Where did the traps come from?

I have been blessed with many mystical experiences and revelations. Trying to describe God and those experiences is impossible. Trying to describe anything about God is beyond our reach. So, in our feeble attempt to define and understand God, we use metaphors, similes, and such. Worst yet, we make God from our image and likeness. We even give God a worldview that enhances our culture and is couched in a list of human emotions. Worst yet, we describe God with an immature emotional system like ours. God can be emotionally fickle, manipulative, condemning, difficult if not impossible to understand, and needs to satisfy himself emotionally.

We have heard and possibly used phrases such as,

"We must earn God's love by doing the impossible."

"God is described as a threat that you cannot escape."

"God will never give you more troubles than you can handle."

"God is testing you."

"God has given you troubling circumstances so you can get closer to Him."

All these statements are false. They describe God as a trickster who plays with His people. They hold you back from trusting God.



Lies about God are everywhere.

Yes, lies are told to you by everyone. I hear these lies every day. Social media is loaded with religious lies.

The best lies appear to be truthful, comforting, and easily digested. They appeal to our broken, frail selves. These lies often draw the wrong picture of God and Christianity. Thus, the lies make it even harder to trust in God.

Making God in our image and likeness was somewhat helpful in deterring human intimacy with a Divine God.

With all the shared emotions, it was easy to see God the Father as only a warm, fatherly Creator. Jesus, who took on human form, is now our friend, and the unseen Holy Spirit is our empowerment tool.

The next step in deterring Godly intimacy is likening our friend Jesus to our human friends whom we expect to nurture and care for us. In short, our human friends should be supportive. When they are disappointing, we frequently get angry towards them and hold grudges for years.

We seek to control our friends to supply our needs, and so do we with our friend Jesus.

We get angry at God/Jesus/Holy Spirit for their failures to give us what we want. We accuse them of nasty things. It is okay for us to curse God. If God gets too difficult, we can put Him on the shelf and make Him our personal genie.

To further enhance our control, it was necessary to destroy the Bible and the Church that governs faith and morality.

The most pleasurable destructive plan fosters the illusion that the individual knows everything. The individual's uncontested option validates that we have become the god we created. There is no singular authority.

That is the short story on how the traps towards intimacy with God and true spiritual freedom began.

To summarize: We make God into our image and likeness and make efforts to control Him and try to sustain that control by making God untrustworthy and not appealing. Easy to do, make everyone a god.

Let us look more specifically into the instrument of entrapment that flourishes from the swamp of sin still thriving in and around us.



Another lie

Most lies portray Scripture as a book of magic answers. For example, a troubled person looks for the magic answer, opens the book to a random page, and reads a random quote. The quote is a description of Judas hanging himself. The person now begins to another random page and reads another random quote that says, "And do likewise."



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Scripture is reliable, but it was not meant to be magical. It has yet to have direct answers to all our questions. Try looking up artificial insemination, for example.



Another lie

Forgive and forget.

We know our lack of forgiveness and the following bitterness is a major block to our prayers.

'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.'

Forgiving someone does not mean ignoring what happened and how it affected us. It means we choose to let go of the resentment and anger we feel toward the person who wronged us.

Forgiving also frees us from bitterness and allows us to experience God's peace and joy.

Some try to take forgiveness beyond what might be impossible and become loving friends with the offender.

How many times have we unjustly condemned ourselves for being unable to forget an offense? That is one more Satanic trick/entrapment to keep us away from God.

Reconciliation is different than forgiving. We are not obliged to reconcile.



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How can we forgive?

See the offender as God sees them.

Ask God to bless them.

Eventually, you will be released from your bitterness

Another lie



Lies often make their way into our lives by manipulating the truth, thus misrepresenting God.

For example: "When two or three are gathered together, God will be there, and He will grant their petitions."

About forty years ago, I was in direct sales. In a misguided effort to inspire us, our manager would say, "I want sales today. Who else wants sales today?" We would all cheer, "We want sales today." He would joyfully shout, "Since we are in agreement, God will answer our prayers."

He had not read the entire passage. The sales manager was trying to hold God to a promise that God never made.



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Trying to force God to perform through our actions is called witchcraft.

The passage says, "**When sincere believers gather together in Jesus' name, are at peace with each other and God, and are earnestly praying, God will answer their prayers.**"

That is a very different meaning than what the sales manager promoted.

The correct Scripture, our reliable source, has a lot of ifs. **If** they are sincere, **if** they are baptized Christians, **if** they are not in conflict with each other, **if** they have no serious sins on their souls, and **if** they are earnestly praying for God's will be done, **then** God will answer their prayers.



Another lie

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "Truly, I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." **Mark 11:22**

I remember a friend saying he had enough faith that he would not get COVID-19. Two weeks later, he was infected and gave his wife a good dose of COVID-19.



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The better interpretation might be:

In **Mark 11:22**, **Have faith in God**. If you have unwavering trust and confidence in God, remarkable things can happen. Jesus uses a mountain as a vivid metaphor, meaning what might appear to be serious obstacles in our lives can be overcome.

By abusing this metaphor again, the individual gets disappointed in his failing God. So why bother to get intimate?

We can be set free from misinterpretations by selecting our readings wisely. Refrain from going to social media for answers to anything; read not only Scripture but also reliable secondary interpretive sources. Be sure to read the entire section of Scripture, not just a line or two. Be sure to evaluate the Scripture in the context of its time, place, and circumstance. Get to know God well. You can assess them more easily. Does this sound like the God that I know?



Another lie:

Pray in the name of Jesus.

We are taught that praying in Jesus' name forces God to answer our prayer. That is Witchcraft.

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What does it mean to pray in the name of Jesus? First, we must know Jesus well to understand His specific will for a particular situation. Then we can pray in his name.

It would be wise to ask God if we should be praying and how we should pray before we pray for something. Then, we can have the assurance of praying in Jesus' name.



Another lie:

Let's make a deal.

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You can attempt to play games with God by doing something good, expecting a good thing in return. Let's make a deal that is filled with your stuff.

God is not a player.





Another lie:

"God will not give you any more than you can handle."

Here you go again, blaming God for what is the product of your sowing and reaping.

The Scriptural reference is "God can overcome any sinful thought you might have." The euphemism is entirely different than the truth.

Do you know that 80% of our thoughts are negative? And 95% of those thoughts are repeated. We have about 60,000 thoughts per day. 80% of those are negative. That means that we have 4,000 negative thoughts per waking hour.

Set Free



The truth of this quote is much more helpful since your sinful sowing and reaping begins with a sinful thought. If you allow God and Listen, you can get over yourself and conquer the sinful thought, thus preventing further sin and its consequences.

Additionally, prayer helps, replacing the negative thoughts with good and holy thoughts and then getting up and doing something good and holy.

"God will not give you any more than you can handle." is a lie that prevents you from a relationship with a loving God who wants the best for you and disempowers you since you are avoiding the responsibility for your actions.



Another lie:

God tests you so that you will grow in faith.

Let's say it another way. God brings difficulties upon you purposefully so that you will grow in faith.

Set Free

Run from that God. Scripture clearly states that sin, Satan, and persecution cause suffering.

We forget that sin is not just our sinfulness but corporate and original sin, which we are still fighting against.

Let me make it very clear. God does not test. However, if you allow God, He can use a situation that you or someone else brought upon you to draw you closer to Him, but He did not cause the situation.

If you put these pious euphemisms together, you have created a severe problem. Blaming God for your difficulties rather than taking rightful responsibility, you have reinforced that you are indeed broken and fragile, and God is not trustworthy.



Another lie:

It is okay to get angry at God. I get angry because I believe that God has failed me in some way. I had relied on God, and He did not come through.

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That anger is a "preadolescent poor baby you" acting out.

The assumption is that you feel you know more than God, so you are justified in your anger. Being angry toward God is an enormous sin. You have dismissed God; you made Him less than God and made yourself god.





Another lie

Another narcissistic lie is that we can control God. Misrepresenting God, we are taught that we can control Him.

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I have challenged several ministers on their approach to the salvation altar call. The words give the false impression that if we initiate something, then God will do something. It is not that way at all.



The better approach would be for the minister to say, "God has always been relentlessly pursuing you. He is calling you to Himself. Respond to that call by coming forward and let us embrace you in His Precious Name."

To summarize, our lack of trust often results from others' erroneous beliefs and misconceptions based on our inability to trust.

Another lie



Pop psychology has infiltrated many churches with a feel-good philosophy. The lie I hate the most and has destroyed many good people is "You must forgive yourself."

Pop psychology says, "Thanks, God, I am so humbled that You have forgiven me. My next step to complete Your forgiveness is for me to forgive myself. I must complete Your forgiveness because something is lacking in Your forgiveness. Fortunately for me, I can handle Your lack by forgiving myself. I am so happy that I become greater than You by doing so." Humanism has become a theology.

Set Free



God forgives. We walk in that forgiveness by stopping the sinful act and doing something different.

Tell St. Paul writes, when is a liar no longer a liar? When he becomes a truth-teller. The key is doing the opposite behavior. More than not, we lie to be accepted. When we struggle to be a truth teller, we fear rejection. When we find that truth-telling gets more acceptance, we become healed and complete our forgiveness journey through God's grace.

This is a Benedictine process of conversatio, change.



Another lie

I call it the Satanic lie of self-esteem. It is good to remember that anything that begins with self soon follows with self-destruction.

The concept of self-esteem is prevalent and promoted in schools and churches.

Our self-esteem is built upon our primary caregivers and our life's successes and failures. Solid self-esteem is our protection against being rejected. Rejection and annihilation, fear of death, are the two driving forces in our lives. We live in fear.

Give an example of myself and the development of my self-esteem.:

My family of origin taught me that I will be well thought of and thus a success in the world by: The use of power and being well-educated, work hard, have money and be good-looking. All this can be easily destroyed, leading us into depression and destruction.

Using this example, if I had lost my job, I would have simultaneously destroyed my self-esteem.

So many older adults see themselves as having little value because they have the self-esteem rule that they must be productive. Old age has taken away their value. Major depression would follow. Depression is a favorite place for Satan.

Set Free



Once, I was in a job interview. The interviewer asked, "Who are you?" The Holy Spirit told me, and I repeated, "I am the son of God, the brother of Jesus, heir to the kingdom now and forever." I did not get the job.

Later, I discovered how I was heir to the kingdom now: being a New Testament prophet, priest, teacher, healer, and builder.

Our giant step to freedom from the captivity of the lie of self-esteem is to replace that lie with **God's esteem**.

That statement of how God sees me has inspired and empowered me through many difficult situations.

How do you understand how God sees you, and how do you mature into His vision?

In a balanced life, we discover His vision through Scripture and the teachings of the Church, particularly the teachings of St Benedict. We experience the vision of God and are empowered to mature into it by prayer—lots of prayer, community, and listening.

Let me tell you a story.



Br. Brendan and I went white water kayaking. We were promised instructions before we began but received none. Fortunately, I previously had gotten some instructions from YouTube. So here we were, foolishly kayaking over white-water rapids. Br. Brendan was repeatedly saying the Jesus prayer. I constantly yelled over the river's roar, "Help me, God!"

We wanted to stay alive and keep our kayaks. After a while, I felt like an expert.

Then there they were, right in front of me, many giant rapids. I approached them with the wisdom of YouTube. The nearby rapids would surely topple me if I did not get over these rocks. I got caught in the rocks.

So, once again, I accessed my vast YouTube knowledge. Nothing worked. I screamed so God could hear me. I said, "God, please teach me something I don't already know." Clear as a bell over the river's roar, God said, "Put your paddle in the water and don't move it." That seemed strange, but I did it anyway. Immediately, I felt the enormous power of the river against the paddle.

The next time I was aware of myself, I was successfully over those rocks and safely beyond the other rapids that had previously been threatening. That is a true story. The captivity of my wisdom failed me.

Set Free



In my desperation, I had to get over myself and listen. That is going to be the first step to knowing God. Get over yourself and listen. How do I get over myself? God lives within us. Indeed, that is true. I prefer the phrase, I live in, with, and through God. All that we do is in with and through Him. We are in HIM. The more we become aware of God's Presence, the better we can listen. When God's voice becomes more significant than ours, we will get over ourselves.



Our problem due to the lie of self-esteem

Yes, we are grateful for Jesus' dynamic expression of God's love, but we hardly feel worthy of such.

You can leave your unworthiness when you realize you are not worthy of anything alone. The lie of self-esteem has failed you again.



What makes you worthy? God has made you worthy. You will grow more in that wisdom as you relate more intimately with your loving, merciful God.

How can we do that?

Growing in worthiness and trust begins by associating with people you respect, not vampires.

Vampires are those who want to get everything they can from you. They are constantly using "poor baby me" manipulative tactics. They are the naysayers, always complaining about something. They never take responsibility for their situation. Perhaps they even blame God for their misery. These people do not respect you. They are sucking your blood and distracting you from being set free to move toward God. Say goodbye to them.

How can you do that lovingly? When they complain, have them set goals to overcome the complaint. When you have accomplished your goals, give me a call. When they call you to complain again, say nothing but ask them if they have satisfied their goals. They will soon stop calling you.

Those that you respect will see you as valuable. Those who respect you may not always understand you and some of your oddly unique behaviors, but they will always love you.

Let's talk about SIN.

The forgiveness Jesus gave you on the cross when He begged His Father to "forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

We do not know, nor are we capable of knowing, the enormity of our sins, including those little ones like stealing sweets from Grandma's candy drawer. We all have sinned, even some terrible sins. We might ask, "How can God possibly forgive me?" The answer is, "Because He is God."

We cannot imagine or understand God's love and mercy for us. We will never be worthy of anything regarding God.

The fact is He has made you worthy through His crucified Son. So "get over it" and be joyful for His graciousness to make you worthy

The only unforgivable sin is the one you fail to repent and confess.



Some guilt may burden you.

I remember an elderly lady visiting our counseling office just for a weekend. She was troubled and very anxious. We spoke for over an hour, trying to sort things out. During our lunch break, I asked God how I could help this troubled woman most. He said, "Ask her about her abortion."

After lunch, we met again. In a calm, loving way, I said, "Tell me about your abortion." She broke down and cried for some time. Then she told the story that had been haunting her for thirty years. Yes, her guilt over killing her child was killing her.

We spoke, she cried some more, we prayed, and finally asked God for forgiveness. At last, she was freed.

This woman was carrying objective guilt. By that, I mean she did something sinful and was guilty. That is the case for most of us. We did something wrong, so we are guilty. Subjective guilt is something far different but also burdens many people. Subjective guilt happens when you judge yourself. You believe that you did something wrong. You offended your rule book called "How the world should go according to me". For example, Your rule book says, "I must succeed at all things." OPPS I FAILED. I am subjectively guilty.

Shame is a sad story. Shame is created by the individual's judgment of their dysfunctional childhood. For some reason, the child judged their parents for not loving him. Since parents are considered gods and gods are never wrong, the child concludes that they are bad and not worthy. They often think, "Something is wrong with me." A loving, respectful community can help bring healing.

We have so much to get over.



We can grow in trust by knowing how God operates.

Scripture read correctly, and the teachings of the Church Fathers describe God as everlasting, all-powerful, perfect, all-knowing, forgiving, merciful, and eager to give grace and pardon for your sins.

Did you know that God pursues you even in your sinfulness and unwillingness to be interested in Him?

God is described as always being the initiator of good. You are always the responder to good.

You, as a responder, is an essential concept. If you think about God, if you pray, if you do a good work, if you empathize with or love your neighbor, if you get out of bed and struggle your way to Sunday church, it is all because He has inspired you to do so.

So please remember that if you even think a good thought or do a good deed, God had inspired you. All you did was respond.

Imagine the opportunity of being a responder.

It can be a real occasion to know God.

Imagine when you think of or do good, charitable, and merciful things you are responding to. If God can bring your narcissistic self to the point of caring for others, He must be worthy of your trust.

Get over yourself and listen.

Praying with someone is not simply a ritual but an act of unity and love toward each other and God.

A good example was when a minister and his wife entered my counseling room. I noticed that she was limping because of pain in her knee. I asked if he had prayed for her. He had not. I asked him to get on his knees in front of her and pray. He said a ritualistic prayer full of expletives and fancy phrases rather loudly but unattached and lacking in love for his wife. After the prayer, I asked her how her knee felt, and she replied that it still hurt.

I then showed him how to pray as an act of unity with his wife. He prayed sincerely and with fewer words. The wife's knee pain went away. You need not be fancy with your prayers. Pray briefly with love. He got over himself and listened. He became one with her.

Let your trusted friends pray with you, and you receive the prayer and listen.

To grow in trust, you must be trustworthy. You can increase your trustworthiness by representing God in your home and community. Home and community are where your vows/promises of obedience, stability, and our willingness to change, conversatio, play a big part. St. Benedict gives us a comprehensive list of things we can do.

Even if you do not fully trust God, it does not mean that you can sit on the sidelines. You can learn by participation.

To summarize, your growth in trusting your Good and Gracious Lord is to remove yourself from the vampires, gather around those you respect, join a faithful Christian community, be involved with some ministry, and pray at home privately and with your family.



So, where do we go from here?

Benedict is the first of his time to promote finding God in community vs. the solitude of the desert.

If we wish to fully incorporate God's image of us into our lives and climb up Benedict's ladder of humility. In that case, we must get over ourselves and listen.

We cannot live a life that essentially rejects God and have an intimate relationship with Him at the same time.

Remember, this is a lifelong journey. Have reasonable expectations.

Live a balanced life.

Treasure and participate in your communities, marriage, family, Church, and the Cistercians.

Pray throughout the day. The Cistercian Daily Prayers, the Rule of St. Benedict, and Scripture are excellent.

Reflect often, examining conscience, confession, and repentance, Ongoing Lectio Divina.

Receive the Sacraments frequently.

Be honest and transparent with your Abbot and mentor.

At all times, remember to be grateful:

Gratitude keeps us alive and kicking.

The lack of gratitude makes us self-absorbed and lifeless.

Gratitude changes us. We get happier, more empowered, more creative, more emotionally secure, and more good things.

Gratitude will open our souls to the unity of God, self, and others. Gratitude moves us from limitations and fear to expansion and love.

At all times, be grace greedy and set the captives free.

