

# The Child-Like Spirit an Essential Condition of Entering Heaven

by Charles Finney

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*The sermon emphasizes that a child-like spirit characterized by humility, trust, and simplicity is essential for entering the kingdom of heaven.*

**Scripture:** John 1:12, Psalm 131:1-2, Proverbs 3:5-6, Matthew 5:3, Matthew 11:25, Matthew 18:3, Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17, James 4:10, 1 Peter 2:2

**Topics:** "Humility in Salvation", "Child-Like Faith"

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## Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of adopting a child-like spirit to enter the kingdom of heaven, as illustrated by Jesus' teachings in Matthew 18:3 and Mark 10:15. He outlines key characteristics of children--transparency, humility, trust, affection, and a teachable spirit--that reflect the qualities essential for salvation. Finney argues that without these traits, individuals remain dishonest and unfit for God's kingdom, as they lack the simplicity and openness required to receive divine truth. He concludes that true conversion transforms individuals into a state resembling that of little children, enabling them to embrace faith and humility before God.

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## Transcript

"Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."--Matt. 18:3

"Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein."--Mark 10:15

The passage from Matthew stands in the following connection: The disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

"And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Look at the question which drew forth this decisive remark from our Lord:--"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Strange question this, for holy men to ask--for men to ask, who had now been in the society of the Meek and Lowly One long enough, it would seem, to understand and to have imbibed his spirit. Our Lord wisely took advantage of the question, to propound one vastly important principle in

reference to the nature of his kingdom and the consequent fitness for entering it.

In discussing the subject here presented, it will be important,

I. TO STATE SOME OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LITTLE CHILDREN.

II. TO SHOW WHY THIS STATE OF MIND IS INDISPENSABLE TO SALVATION.

I. It is important in the outset to consider attentively the fact that the case taken for illustration is a little child; not a young man or a young woman;--not one who had reached the period where little children, as they advance in age, are wont to lose the simplicity of little ones. Let it also be carefully noted, that the characteristics of the little child, to which the Savior refers, are not, as they appear in the very young child, moral, but only natural. They serve to illustrate the moral qualities of character which are indispensable conditions of salvation; yet they are not themselves moral, for the reason that they are spontaneous, and are not developed under the action of either the intelligence or the conscience. Until both these faculties are so far matured as to act responsibly, it is a great mistake to suppose that there can be either moral character or moral action.

The language used by our Lord plainly shows that He refers to analogous and not to identical qualities. "Except ye be converted and become as little children." He does not demand that we should become as ignorant as they--as void of enlightened conscience as they. No. Like Paul, He would say: "In malice, be ye children; but in understanding, be ye MEN."

Let us, then, trace the analogies between the characteristics of little children and those of Christian converts.

1. In transparency or guilelessness of character. This is a most remarkable characteristic of very young children. It has been said that "children and fools always tell the truth." The infant mind is a stranger to guile. It has not yet learned to practice duplicity; it has not learned what the thing itself is. Mark that little one; no dodging, no evasion of the truth; no desire to cover up; not yet the first idea of having anything to be covered up;--how guileless and beautiful in his transparent simplicity! No wonder everybody loves such little children. You love them for the same reason, substantially, that you love holiness. It is intrinsically lovely. Their characteristics closely resemble those of the true convert--those of the holy in heaven itself.

Do not forget that I am now speaking, not of a child who has grown forward into guile and deceit--who has begun to violate his conscience, and of course has a motive for trying to appear what he is not; not of such does the Savior speak.

2. Next in the list of infantile characteristics, I notice humility. By this I mean, not a sense of sin, but a willingness to be known and appreciated according to truth. The little child is in this sense humble. He feels no repugnance to being known as he is. He has not once thought of trying to conceal his real character. He is ignorant of almost every thing, and he seems very cheerfully to assume that such is the fact. Hence, he asks questions of every body and under any and all circumstances, never anxious lest he should expose his ignorance. Indeed he expects to expose it if he has it, and deems it no harm to do so. He seems to suppose that there can be no objection to being known according to the truth in his case.

It is often very striking and instructive to see how this spirit develops itself in quite young children. It often seems as if they should scarcely find time to sleep, so earnest are they to learn the meaning of the thousand new things which they daily hear and see. You see them asking their simple-hearted questions

of every body and every where. Even the little children of Queen Victoria will run into the kitchen and ask questions of the humblest servants in her household, and none are so low in station that they are ashamed to expose their ignorance before them. In fact, at this unambitious age of life, they seem to have no idea of aristocratic distinctions. They are free of heart to associate with any kind-hearted children, be their color or condition in life what it may.

How unlike all this is the condition of those who have advanced in years and in sin till they are ashamed to be known, and afraid even to know themselves! Then see how artful--how studious to keep their real character in the dark! How expert in framing disguises, and how intent on keeping up false appearances! If they are ignorant on any point, perhaps they will sooner remain so than run the risk of exposing their ignorance by asking a question. How strong the contrast between them and little children, in this respect of true humility!

3. Little children are also confiding. The spontaneous impulse of their minds is to believe every thing they hear said, and to assume that every body speaks the truth. Until they have learned by revolting experience that there is a vast amount of falsehood and deception in the world, their simple hearts are altogether unsuspecting and trustful. So should the Christian convert be, and so in fact the real convert is, I mean, in his relations towards God. He comes into a trustful spirit, and seems spontaneously to believe every word God says. He assumes that every promise of God is sure--every declaration reliable. And this is a most striking as well as perfectly indispensable element of true Christian character.

4. Little children are also affectionate. They seem naturally inclined to love. Treat them kindly, and you will not fail to win their young hearts. How easily and spontaneously their warm affections gush forth. All simple-hearted in bestowing their love, they need only see the manifestations of love towards themselves, and they give their hearts, returning love for love without stint or fear. You smile on them; they respond with full and unsuspecting hearts. So the soul of the young convert responds to all the affecting manifestations of the Savior's love, and it is his delight to mark the testimonies of God's loving-kindness, and to let his heart flow out in grateful and responsive love to such a Being!

5. The little child is willing to live by faith. In fact, he does live by faith altogether, and seems to think of no other way to live. He trusts his parents and friends for every thing he needs, and trusts them so heartily that he has no anxieties, no solitudes. He is not restive and uneasy lest somebody should prove false, or lest some of his hopes should fail. That little one trusts his parents implicitly, as if perfectly assured that they will provide for all his wants. He knows he can do nothing, or almost nothing, towards the care of himself and the supply of his own wants; yet he feels no solitudes, but lives along day by day on simple faith.

How beautiful an illustration is this of the spirit of trustful dependence in which the young convert lives of his Savior! The Christian, as we all know, must have this spirit; he has no other way to live a real Christian life--no other way to enjoy peace of mind amid a world of wants and cares--no other way to go on from strength to strength, waxing more and more mighty through the might of Jehovah.

6. Yet another characteristic of the little child is a spirit of candor. He has no motive for wishing what is true to be false. Nobody cavils against the truth till he has an opposing heart. When his heart comes to dislike the truth, then he cavils. He raises senseless objections and tries to believe they have sense and weight in them. Scan his state of mind to the bottom, and you find it to be nothing else but hatred of the truth. He has an interest--at least so he thinks--in opposing the truth. But you see none of this uncandid spirit in the

little child. He is easily controlled by the truth, and seems never to think of resisting it. So of the young convert. He opens his whole heart to the truth and loves to see it revealed, let it out and condemn as it may. What has he to do with cavils against the truth? It seems to him like fighting against God himself, and why should he be found fighting against God?

But it is time to break off from this enumeration of these beautiful and illustrative characteristics of the little child, and advance.

II. To show that a state of mind corresponding to these characteristics of the little child is essential to salvation.

"Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Let it be well considered, that the qualities of character which I have specified as common to little children, are not real holiness. These little ones may not have reached the development of any moral character at all. But their spirit so closely resembles, in some respects, the spirit of the true Christian that it affords a pertinent illustration, and it is only as such that our Savior uses it. And moreover, it stands in so strong contrast with the spirit of the sinner, who gives up his soul to sinning, who violates his conscience, and who of course becomes dishonest, proud and selfish, that it seems the fittest illustration that can be found of the marked difference between those who belong to the kingdom of hell, and those who enter the kingdom of heaven.

But why, let us ask, must persons be converted and become as little children, before they can enter heaven?

1. Because in any other state than this, they are not honest, but on the contrary, entirely dishonest.

Look carefully into these qualities of the little child, and suppose a case in which they are not present. Here is a man whose character is not transparent, but who studiously conceals his real heart. Is not he dishonest--essentially, radically dishonest? How unfit, then, for a place in the kingdom of heaven!

Or suppose him proud, in the sense opposed to that humility which I have named as one characteristic of the little child. He does not consent, by any means, to be known as he truly is. His whole endeavor is to put on, and keep on, a false appearance. Is not this radically dishonest? And who does not know that God can have no sympathy or fellowship with a dishonest mind?

Or again, suppose a man aspiring and ambitious. How rarely can you discover in him anything that even seems like real honesty!

Or suppose him wanting in that confiding trustful spirit which is so prominent in the little child. If you search his character to the bottom you will find that he lacks the element of substantial honesty of mind, and has learned to be distrustful of others by observing that there is nothing trustworthy in himself.

In this way, you may take up successively each element of the spirit peculiar to the little child, and you will see that the absence of these qualities and the presence of their opposites evince a dishonest state of mind and therefore a state utterly unfit for the kingdom of heaven.

2. But again, the beautiful simplicity of character which shines forth in the little child must be essential to prepare us for heaven, because it is so like the spirit that fills all heaven. Did you never consider that all

heaven is full of little children? Christ himself says--"Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven is composed of such as they. Even the tallest archangels have the spirit of little children. You mistake them entirely if you think of them as high and lifted up in a vain notion of their dignity and self-consequence. On the contrary, no dear little child was ever more simple-hearted, more guileless, more transparent than they.-- On the testimony of our Lord himself, we learn that "whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Hence the more simple, confiding, trustful, and open-hearted, the more there is of the spirit of the heavenly world. And hence none can go there who have not these elements of spirit and character. Men must have the soul of heaven in them, or it is no place for them to dwell in. God will not mar heaven by admitting discordant elements there. Hence if we can learn what the spirit of heaven is, we learn what spirit persons must have here before they go there.

3. But a third reason is that this childlike state of mind is indispensable to being taught of God. The holy in heaven, and those who are becoming holy on earth, are all God's pupils. His Divine Spirit is their Great Teacher, promised and given in order to lead them into all truth. But how can God teach those who are not teachable--those who cavil against the truth--hate the light, and will not come to the light, lest their deeds should be reproved?

Now we all know that the little child has a teachable spirit. He loves to be taught, and therefore his mind is all open to truth, and you can teach him anything you please. But if he advances onward to a state of mind all of pride and vanity, and withal, to a state in which his selfish and wicked heart opposes the truth, then how changed! O, he knows so much now that you cannot teach him any thing! He is wiser than any seven men, however skillful they may be in giving the reasons of things. There are some students who can never learn theology. They will forever stumble and flounder along; and the reason is, they are already too wise in their own conceits to become any wiser. Who has not had occasion to observe how surely fatal to the acquisition of knowledge is this spirit of self-conceit? How then can God teach men of such a spirit? I know God sometimes comes down to teach his people "by terrible things in righteousness," and that sometimes He does effect by hard discipline what perhaps could be done by no milder means; yet it is true as a general law of God's spiritual administration, that the "meek," and those only, "will He teach in judgement--the meek will He lead in His way." God makes His creatures bear the responsibility of maintaining a teachable spirit; and according as they do or do not maintain it may they expect to be taught or not taught of God. Hence the necessity of being converted and of becoming as a little child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

4. God cannot teach and cannot bless in any way those who will not confide in him. God adapts the whole course of His discipline with His children to this world as a dark sort of state--where little comparatively can be seen with the eye, and where most things must be received with faith in the veracity and love of our Father. Hence God cannot lead us along as His children unless we confide in Him. Jesus could not do many mighty works in certain cities, because of their unbelief. He could not afford to cast His choice pearl's before swine. God cannot teach, as His children, any class of intelligent beings in earth or heaven, unless they will be simple-hearted and confiding.

5. In no other spirit but that of a little child are men truly submissive to God's will, as revealed in His word or His providence. This is too obvious to need illustration. Yet all must be thus submissive, else they cannot enter heaven.

6. This state of mind is indispensable to peace with God. Unless men are submissive, they are not satisfied with God's ways, and how can He be pleased with theirs?

7. It might also be shown most clearly, that such a state of mind is indispensable to mental and spiritual peace. No one can be at rest in his own spirit unless he is simple-hearted, honest, trustful towards God--in short, unless he has in most decided moral development, those very qualities which in their natural form characterize the little child.

8. It scarcely need be added, in conclusion, that the state of mind of which I speak is indispensable to acceptance with God. This is made plain by the entire course of our illustrations.

I must therefore proceed to close with some

#### REMARKS.

1. This state of mind is always characteristic of young converts. If you see professed converts who have not this spirit, you may be very sure that are not converted. And even great men form no exception to this remark. The greatest men, when converted, are the most child-like. Scores of times have I heard the remark made as if with astonishment--"Such a great man appears just like a little child." The reason was simply this: he had become truly converted: that is all. That had occurred in his case of which the text speaks: He had been converted and had become as a little child. I once heard a Doctor of Divinity spoken of as a great man--an eminently great man. I happened to know the man, and was therefore able to reply: "If you were to see him, you would find him just like a little child, as simple-hearted and as far removed from anything like vanity or pride. You might feel yourself perfectly at ease in his presence, for he does not put on airs as if he were above his fellow men."

Professed converts sometimes come out as they call it, in a state of great excitement, full of shouting and triumph, but are not humble and childlike. You may be almost sure there is some mistake in such cases. They have not entered by the way described by our Lord: have not been so converted as to become like little children. I once knew of a very proud man, who came into possession of this genuine gospel spirit. A friend of his who had known him in his life of sin saw him afterwards in a prayer meeting: "What! said he, would you believe it possible? I saw that man, once so proud, on his very knees, down in the midst of some of the lowest class of society, just as if he were no better than they! He prayed and they prayed and nobody seemed to think of any difference in rank between them. That man, once so full of aristocratic pride is now among the lowest of men." Mark such cases! Christianity develops itself very naturally and very rapidly too in such cases.

2. Selfishness in its moral and proper sense does not appear in very young children. They love their own happiness to be sure: What sentient being does not?-- But this is not the same thing as selfishness. If you would carefully observe the difference between the self-seeking of very young children, and the self-seeking of those whose moral agency is developed, you would discover it to be very great. The little one loves to be happy, but loves to have others happy also. He is altogether simple-hearted and guileless. But as soon as he gets away from his infantile simplicity, the fruits of sin and of guilty selfishness become apparent. Now he is all guileful. Like Adam and Eve he hastens to sow up some fig-leaf covering and to hide himself among the trees of the garden from the searching scrutiny of both God and man. He has done something wrong; all wrong things are mean; he knows and feels it keenly; and therefore seeks to hide and cover up. Until this time he had never done anything which he wished to cover up. Now, therefore, his spirit of concealment and guile reveal his sin and selfishness. All full of fraud and treachery,

he waxes worse and worse; conscious of wrong doing, and anxious to save appearances, his temptations to deceit and hypocrisy are too great for him to resist.

3. Selfishness is too false to be confiding. The selfish youth knows himself to be unworthy of confidence, and hence, judging others by himself, he does not naturally trust them. With no self-respect, it cannot be natural for him to trust his fellows. Unteachable also, he ought to expect to remain in ignorance. How often it happens that sinners get above becoming religious, simply because they become too self-sufficient and proud of their attainments or talents to understand a thing so simple as the gospel. They get into a state of mind in which they cannot learn the plain and humbling doctrines of the cross, and hence they are prepared for yet deeper self-deception. It would be easy to show that selfishness is the greatest self-deception. The selfish man seems to use his intellect only to deceive himself and to deceive others, his main business being to cover up his own true character and real motives. "A deceived heart hath turned them aside," saith the heart-searching word of the Lord; and nothing can be more true. It does most truly turn men aside from integrity and truth. "Deceiving and being deceived," is another daguerrotype sketch of the selfish man's history. It is but a righteous judgment that he who gives himself up to deceive others should be caught in his own snares, deceiving himself just because there is no simplicity nor honesty in him.

4. If children die in real infancy and before moral agency commences, it is easy to see how naturally they pass into the kingdom of heaven. I am aware that some will be stumbled at such a sentiment, for there are some who maintain that even the very marrow, blood, and bones of the infant are altogether sin. But this is not Jesus Christ's teaching. He most fully recognizes the fact that the earliest developments of the infant mind closely resemble true religion. Hence he says all men must be so changed as to become as little children; else they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Little children live in love and walk by faith; so must all who enter the kingdom of heaven. These are the two great elements of piety. Hence the natural adaptedness of little children, (taken at a period anterior to moral agency, sin and self-righteousness,) to be removed to another state where the discipline needful in order to evolve real piety may be brought into action. If they die before they have violated conscience, how naturally will they go right on in progress towards holiness and perhaps we might say progress in holiness. God takes away their body; no temptation therefore assails them from that quarter. They have the loving kindness of the Lamb to lead them along and secure them from all spiritual dangers; what then shall hinder their being truly the children of God in their new abode?

Ye who have lost little children think of this. Dwell on what Christ Himself says--"Of such is the kingdom of heaven." Before they have developed the dishonesty and fiendishness of the selfish spirit, they go in all the simplicity and guilelessness of little children into the presence of their Savior. They will not, like Adam and Eve, fly from God; there is no reason why they should. If they were selfish; if they had trampled down their conscience; if they were intent upon covering up their real character, then they would have abundant reason for flying away from Jehovah's presence.

Precious little ones: how will Jesus gather them in his arms! How intently will He pluck the little flowers and transplant them, yet tender and lovely, into his better garden. A sense of guilt they never have had: happy for them that they are never to have it. All suddenly, from the sleep of death they awake into the society and the scenes of heaven. What an atmosphere is this to wake in, from such a state as that of the infant mind on earth!

But let that child become a sinner before its transition from earth to the eternal state--how changed the scene! Then the qualities of his character become unutterably revolting and shocking. All lustful, proud, impatient, distrustful; not one element of character fit for heaven. O, how dreadful to rush into sin and refuse to obey God! How dreadful to plunge into that gulf of depravity where nothing pure remains, but all is "earthly, sensual, devilish!"

5. Selfish beings are continually progressing into a state more and more offensive to God. As they come to know more of God, they become more intensely and more meanly selfish--more committed to evil, and more fatally opposed to good. Let a young man come here for education, as many have, young in years and not greatly hardened in heart;--he enters the lower classes, comparatively humble in spirit; for a season he passes along quietly and pleasantly to himself; but by and by he becomes ambitious;--then you may see some of the most detestable features of selfishness developing themselves; and perhaps when the time arrives which is to test his standing and his ambition, you may see him angry, and almost mad, because he is not the first and foremost; almost a devil in spirit, he inwardly frets and rages, and outwardly he will often pour out the venom of his selfish and mortified spirit upon the whole surface of the society in which he moves. I have sometimes had occasion to say that I dreaded the influence of the Senior College Class. Do you ask me why? Because they are so testy, so sensitive and so ambitious. What's the matter? They have been in college till they have grown wiser in science but wickedder in heart!

This reveals one great reason why advanced students are so much less likely to be converted than those who have only just entered. The latter have much more simplicity of character, and are much less affected by that horrible ambition which is the bane and curse of so many students. My dear young men, do you know this? Are you aware that the earliest months of your residence in this school are altogether the most hopeful for your conversion,--and that as you go on farther and farther in your course, the difficulties increase, the temptations to sin multiply, and the probabilities of your conversion are exceedingly diminished! O, how does it become you to understand this, and be wise in time!

6. Just in proportion as persons have the spirit of little children are they hopeful subjects of converting grace. Those periods of life in which this spirit is most prominent are the hopeful seasons. Then is the time to press home the truth and bring the mind to the full decision. If you can enlighten the minds of children quite early all the better,--no matter how early, for then the obstacles you have to meet are so much less. But if you leave them to go astray from the path of duty; if they begin to violate their consciences and harden their hearts, you will find that each day and each hour augments exceedingly the difficulties in the way of their submission to God.

It is sometimes said by way of objection to the work of grace, that conversions occur most frequently among children and youth, and in this Institution, among the preparatory and not the more advanced students. What is the reason of this fact? Is it because the more advanced in learning and wisdom have found that religion is all a humbug? No, indeed; but because the mind that persists in a course of sin while it is advancing in knowledge, must be dishonest with itself. I appeal to yourselves; what Sabbath passes over you, in which you do not play a dishonest part with yourselves and with divine truth? You hear the truth; you know it is truth; and you know it has claims upon you for your instant obedience to it; and yet you wickedly resist these claims. There is not one of you who, if he had but five minutes to live, would not cry aloud in anguish: "Pray for me, for I am a guilty sinner, on the very verge of hell!" Your cavils would vanish in a breath. I know the hearts of the young men who sometimes cavil against God's truth, for I have talked scores of times with half-fledged infidels. They know that God is holy, and that they are altogether sinful. They know these solemn truths as well as they know that they exist. It is all in vain that they try to deceive

themselves or others in these matters. They cannot deceive God; and when the searching hour shall come, they will find that they have not even deceived themselves to any good purpose. They know too much, and the eternal truths of God are too well established to allow them to be at ease in their sin. I have never yet seen the first sinner, who, when about to die, needed any arguments presented to prove to him that religion is a reality--that he had broken God's law, and must repent or be lost. In that solemn hour, they all know these things too well to need any more light or reasoning on the subject.

Remember, therefore, that the reason why young persons, as they grow older and more learned, are more averse to the gospel is, not that they see more clearly the groundlessness of the Christian religion, but the reason is, they are more self-deceptive, are more dishonest, more ambitious and aspiring; that they lose the simplicity of their earlier years, and do not deal honestly with the truth which they positively know. Go to them with a personal appeal to their conscience. Say to any of them--"Are you a sinner?" "Oh, yes, I suppose so." "Do you think it right and reasonable for you to live in rebellion against your Infinite Father?" "By no means." "Will you then repent and submit to God?" "No."

Now, such a mind is altogether dishonest with itself and with acknowledged truth. In the light of their case, let me ask you all, if you do not see good and sufficient reason why Christ should say, as in our text--"Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."

There is a forceful pertinence and a searching power in this passage, which often develop themselves in a most striking manner in personal experience. I once knew a very proud woman, who occupied a high position in society and who meant to maintain it, but the power of truth began to reach her soul, and she began to tremble before it. She called on me at my room. I began to reason with her, hoping to aid the work which the Spirit had obviously begun. Gradually her pride began to come down. At length she fell upon her knees for prayer and humiliation before God. In my prayer for her, I was led without any particular forethought, to repeat the words of my present text. She instantly caught these words--they seemed so fitting to her case--and repeated them over after me in a whisper; then, she repeated them again and again and again, each time waxing louder and louder, until her whole soul seemed to be swallowed up in the sentiment--"Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." I stopped speaking, looked round upon her,--and oh, what a change had come over her countenance! Her loftiness and pride had all come down; she was indeed a little child. Years afterwards, being in her society, I adverted to this scene. "O," said she, "that sentiment is the glory of religion. How beautiful and fitting! I could see myself the very opposite of this, but I saw how reasonable that I should become like a little child, and I there found how blessed it is to come down and honor God on his lofty throne."

And now, in the name of my Great Master, I say to you, "Come down and take your fitting place as children before your Great Father. Who of you will now come right down to the very spirit of a little child, saying, "I give up forever all my pride and folly, and put my trust forevermore in the name of the Lord my God?"

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