

Study Guide for

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret

Lilias Trotter



The Sufi is a man who has the purpose of discovering secrets, and they are the secrets of Divine truth and Divine power. He leaves to other men the lifeless husk, that is to say, the things that are seen, and he desires with all his heart to break through to the kernel, that is, to the things that are unseen, and that have in them the essence of eternal life.

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (1926)

Lilias's love for the Southlands began soon after her arrival in Algeria. On her first major expedition south (1895), she made acquaintance with Sufi mystics who would capture her heart and her mind throughout her years in North Africa. From her very first contact, in Tozeur, she sensed in these "*sons of sonshine*" a "*lovely spirit of listening*" as they would gather round and beg her to read from Scripture. Through the decades, she would repeatedly return to the Southlands—timing dependent on the political climate, national and international—to "*that particular stretch of desert,*" between Tozeur and Tolga, that in her words "*we have always felt was especially given to us for our corner,*" eventually setting up a permanent winter post. The artist in her responded to the artist in the Sufis, their great writers of old being as much poets as philosophers. Her heart responded to their efforts to seek after God.

Toward the close of her life, she completed a work—arguably her magnum opus—written specifically for the Sufi mystics: *The Way of the Sevenfold Secret*. Lucid, elegant, and strong, it appealed to the common ground shared by Christian and Sufi alike: the purpose of discovering the secrets of divine truth and divine power. Addressing the Sufis' means of seeking divine union through a succession of seven spiritual states, which in the end still may not please what they see as an arbitrary God, she presents an alternate path "*wherein we have found joy and peace from the first step.*" She takes the seven sayings of Christ about Himself contained in John's Gospel and explores how each offers the "secret" for which the Sufis long: satisfaction (Bread), illumination (Light), access (Door), leadership (Shepherd), life (Resurrection and Life), progress (Way), and the ultimate union (Vine).

The English translation of *The Way of the Sevenfold Secret* can be accessed at https://liliastrotter.com/wp-content/uploads/seven_fold_secret-4.pdf. To guide personal reflection or group discussion, related Scripture passages and questions for each of the "secrets" are provided below. We include the cover drawing from the original Arabic book; the line drawings for each of the seven "I Ams" of Jesus are copied from the original seven-panel fold-out of the "I Ams of Jesus"—Arabic on one side; French on the other. (Read more about the Sufi mystics at <https://liliastrotter.wordpress.com/2012/08/03/sons-of-sunshine/>)

Miriam Huffman Rockness

THE WAY OF THE SEVENFOLD SECRET



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The Secret of Satisfaction



“I Am the Bread of Life”

Again, as the bread satisfies the hunger of the body, so this indwelling of Christ in us, satisfies the hunger of the soul, until it becomes rested through and through. And we believe that this hunger of the soul has been granted to you, our Brothers of the Road, by the Grace of God, to prepare you for the satisfying that is to be found in our Lord the Christ according to these His words: “He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth in Me shall never thirst.”

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (p. 15, par. 2)

Scripture

Jesus feeds a throng of people by multiplying a few small loaves of bread and a couple of dried fish (John 6:11–14). But the next day, the people are hungry again! Jesus tries to point them (and us) to spiritual nourishment that satisfies our hearts forever.

John 6:31–35; 47–51

- 6:31 Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”
- 6:32 Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.”
- 6:33 “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.”
- 6:34 They said to him, “Lord, give us this bread always.”
- 6:35 Jesus said to them, “**I am the bread of life**; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”
- 6:47 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”
- 6:48 “I am the bread of life.”
- 6:49 “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.”
- 6:50 “This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die.”
- 6:51 “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Reflection and Discussion

1. Jesus contrasts two appetites—one for physical nourishment and one for spiritual sustenance. In what ways do people today try to find spiritual satisfaction?
2. According to the Sufis, the secret of the *Rida* (Satisfaction) was sought in the ecstasy produced through *dhikr* (“reciting” the names of God in continuous chanting aided by drugs, autosuggestions, and other processes). What, according to Jesus, is the soul’s secret to satisfaction? (Consider specifically the Liliás quotation at the beginning of this lesson.)
3. What do you receive physically from your “daily bread”? Without bread, who/what/where would you be? In your own words, explain what Jesus means when He says, “I am the bread of life.” What does He provide spiritually?
4. Liliás says of Jesus, “*in the end of His life He called Himself ‘a corn of wheat’*” (John 12:24). Walk through the process required for a kernel on a stalk to become nourishing bread. Relate this to Jesus’s life story.
5. How did the children of Israel receive the manna—their “bread of heaven”? (Ps. 105:40) According to Jesus, how do we receive the true and living bread? (John 6:35)
6. At what times of the day, in what settings, and with what accompaniments/condiments is it appropriate to eat bread? What spiritual parallels do you see for being nourished spiritually by the bread of life?

7. Jesus makes some startling claims in this passage: that He can satisfy our deepest needs and desires, that He came from God the Father, that He can preserve us as His children, that He is the source of eternal life given through the sustenance of His broken body. How do these claims compare with what most people in our society believe about Jesus? What do these claims mean for you today?
8. Write (or speak) a one- or two-sentence statement of gratitude for/to Jesus as the bread of life.

The Secret of Illumination



“I Am the Light of the World”

We have seen the first of these secrets of the overflow of the mercy of God to us in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ; that is, we have seen “In Him was life.” Now we go on to another of these secrets, for the completion of this verse tell us, “The Life was the Light of men . . .’ Now life comes before light, but if light does not follow life, life will die, as you may see in every buried seed that seeks for light as soon as life has begun its work, and reaches forth till it finds the sun. So it is with the soul of men. Life needs light whereby to live. Christ came not only to be the Life of the world, but the Light of the world.”

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (p. 18, par. 1)

Scripture

The first chapter of the Gospel of John—and several other passages throughout that gospel—the Evangelist declares that Jesus is the light of the world.

John 1:9; 12:46; 8:12; 12:35

- 1:9 The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.
- 12:46 “I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”
- 8:12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “**I am the light of the world**; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
- 12:35 Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes.”

Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your most vivid memory involving a dark place? What feelings do you associate with darkness? Why?
2. What are the properties of light? In what ways does Jesus manifest these qualities?
3. Compare how the natural source of light (sun) reaches the earth to how the light of the world (Son) brings the light of God to the earth.
4. Consider Liliás’s reference to Icarus. How are human efforts to reach the “light” with his own means futile?
5. How is Christ’s “secret of illumination” distinct from the Muslim understanding of spiritual knowledge or enlightenment? (p. 19, par. 5–6)
6. Liliás suggests three meanings to Jesus’s claim to be “the light of the world:” (1) to reveal God; (2) to show us what a perfect person should be; (3) to expose the evil and harm that dim our souls. Explain how Jesus uniquely sheds lights in each of these ways.
7. In what ways can we encourage the rays of light that come to us through Christ to remain “*bright and grow in brightness*”?
8. What did Jesus want the people in the crowd then—or today—to conclude about who He is?
9. Write (or speak) a one- or two-sentence statement of gratitude for/to Jesus as the light of the world.

The Secret of Access



“I Am the Door”

Now if you will follow on, there comes through Him by the light the revelation of another wonderful secret: the secret of access to God . . . In the words of Christ, we have the step of drawing near to God set forth to us by the symbol of a door—the door into a sheepfold. Now a sheepfold is a place of safety in the midst of danger . . . So, in this new secret, God makes known to us that there is a place where even now in the wilderness of this world with evil prowling all around we may rest in safety as sheep within the fold. There is a place of nearness to God where the devil dares not venture that he may snatch the soul away; there is a salvation that is here and now.

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (p. 24, from par. 1–4)

Scripture

After Jesus healed the blind man, He challenges the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, for their spiritual blindness. Using imagery common to their everyday lives, Jesus points to the shepherd as the one who knows his sheep by name, citing His third claim: "I am the Door" - the only access to the sheepfold.

John 10:1, 7, 10

- 10:1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber."
- 10:7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep."
- 10:10 "**I am the door**; if any one enter by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

Reflection and Discussion

1. According to Scripture, what is the wall that separates us from God? What is the wall of separation, according to the Sufi belief? (p. 24, par. 8)
2. In what ways do people today attempt to find favor with and access to God? Why are human efforts to find access "through the wall" unsuccessful? (p. 25, par. 2)
3. If neither repentance nor intercession of saints and prophets will remove the "*stones of sin*," how can the sins that built the wall be taken away? In other words, how can we find entrance or access to God? (p. 26, par.1–3)
4. Liliias says, "*Christ Himself by gathering our sins in Himself and taking it away, has become the Door.*" How does the concept of "*a door of access to God*" differ from Islamic belief? (p. 24, par. 4–5)
5. In your own words, express the meaning of Jesus's statement as quoted by Liliias, that those who enter the door "shall be saved, and shall go in and out and find pasture."
6. What did Jesus want His listeners to understand—then and now—when He said, "I am the door"?
7. Write (or speak) a one- or two-sentence statement of gratitude for/to Jesus as the door by which we enter His pasture.

The Secret of Leadership



“I Am the Good Shepherd”

God Most High, who created us and you, knows that it is in our hearts to seek a Leader. He knows that this Leader must be a man like ourselves, who has trodden the path by which He would lead us: but it is also in the counsels of God, that this Leader, to lead us aright must be more than man, even as the sheep, who have like ourselves that inclination to follow, are not sage when they are following other sheep, but only when they are following the shepherd . . . Therefore God chose Christ our Lord, before He was born on the earth, because in Him the Divine Leadership and the human leadership meet in one, for He is “declared to be the Son of God with power” in the Spirit; while in the flesh He is “the Son of Man.”

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (p. 29, par. 5; p. 30, par. 1)

Scripture

Jesus continued to develop the sheep/shepherd imagery, presenting Himself as the good shepherd, *the* trusted leader their hearts crave.

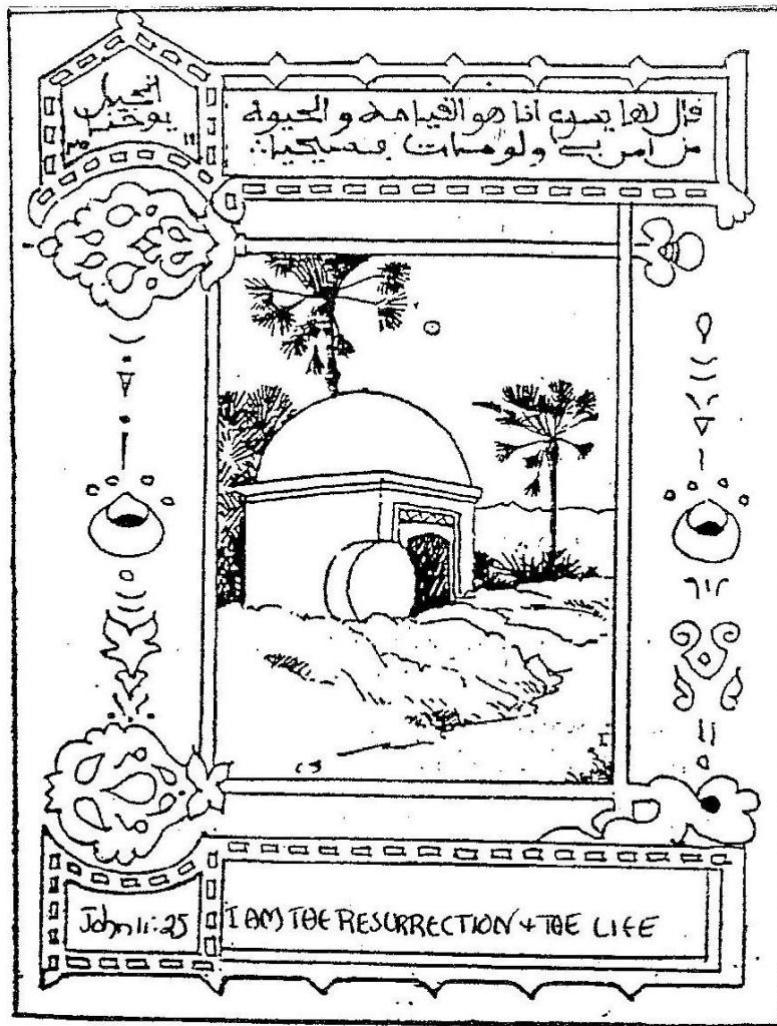
John 10:2–5, 11, 14, 27–28

- 10:2 “. . . but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep . . .”
- 10:3 “To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”
- 10:4 “When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.”
- 10:5 “A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him for they do not know the voice of strangers.”
- 10:11 **“I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
- 10:14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me.”
- 10:27 “My sheep hear my voice; and I know them, and they follow me.”
- 10:28 “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.”

Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the nature/character of sheep? What is the role of the shepherd? How does the character of a sheep relate to its need for a shepherd?
2. What is the relationship of a Sufi disciple to his sheikh (leader)? (p. 29, par. 4) Why is the trustworthiness of a leader so important to the leader’s followers? Can you identify someone(s) who has been a “good” leader in your life—and why?
3. Liliás notes that the Creator God has implanted within His creation a longing for leadership. What attributes does she claim to be essential for that leader? (p. 29, par. 5) How does Christ fulfill this requisite for a good leader?
4. How does the Good Shepherd protect His sheep?
5. How does Liliás prepare the Sufis for challenges inherent to a public confession of their faith in Jesus Christ? (p. 30, par. 4; p. 31, par. 1–2) How might our challenges today differ from those experienced by the Sufis—then and now?
6. The *challenges* faced by disciples of Christ are followed by identified *temptations*, or the biblical (John 10) “*images of dangers that beset the sheep*”: stranger . . . thief . . . hireling . . . wolf . . . In each image, to whom is Jesus referring? Describe a real or potential experience that corresponds to one or all of these “dangers.” What strategy is given for dealing with these enemies “*to our path of obedience*”? (p. 32, par. 4–6)
7. Write (or speak) a one- or two-sentence statement of gratitude for/to Jesus as the good shepherd.

The Secret of Life out of Death



“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”

. . . the deliverance that is brought to us by Christ “the Resurrection and the Life” goes deeper than the change in our position before God. It is the true opening of the mystery of the inward passing of our spirits from the old life of self into the new life of righteousness. You have sought this passing apart from Him, and you have been as those who follow a mirage, and see it sink into the hot sand as they draw near. But in Christ you can find the reality here and now, for to be joined with Him in His death by faith, means a blow of severance with the past. As it is written, “In that He died, He died unto sin once, but in that He liveth, He liveth unto God: likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (p. 34, par. 5)

Scripture

Jesus's friend Lazarus has died. His sister Martha confronts Jesus with the news (though He already knew the situation) and Jesus responds with one of His most revealing "I am's."

John 11:21–26

- 11:21–22 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."
- 11:23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."
- 11:24 Martha answered, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."
- 11:25–26 Jesus said to her, "**I am the Resurrection and the Life**. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Reflection and Discussion

1. In what context did Jesus present the fifth "I am"? What is the deeper meaning of Jesus's claim to be the resurrection and the life? (p. 34, par. 1–6)
2. In what ways did the Sufi mystics attempt to loosen the hold of their evil nature? (p. 35, par. 1) Through what means do we seek to be free from sin? What is the wonderful secret that God brings to "pass away" the sinful nature and set free eternal life? (p. 35, par. 2–4)
3. The deliverance that is brought to us by Christ goes deeper than the change in our position before God. What is the secret of the "*passing of our spirits from the old life of self into the new life of righteousness*" here and now? (p. 35, par. 5; p. 36, par. 1)
4. What does the rite of baptism mean to you? What does it do/not do?
5. It is hard to disconnect "life and resurrection" from material/physical and spiritual/eternal hope. Name some of your hopes for the future.
6. What is the significance of Jesus's teaching about "life out of death"? If possible, describe a specific example that has meaning for you.
7. Write (or speak) a one- or two-sentence statement of gratitude for/to Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

The Secret of Progress



“I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”

. . . three of the great aims of the Sufis are to follow the Way, and to know the Truth, and to live the Life of God; and the question before them is how to progress from step to step in reaching these aims. This thought of progress is bound up in the heart of the Brotherhoods . . . See how these three titles are joined together like the links of a chain: “I am the Way”—a path prepared. “I am the Truth”—light to reveal the path. “I am the Life”—strength to tread the path.

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (p. 39, par. 4, 6)

Scripture

Jesus makes this claim when talking to His disciples, the evening before His crucifixion.

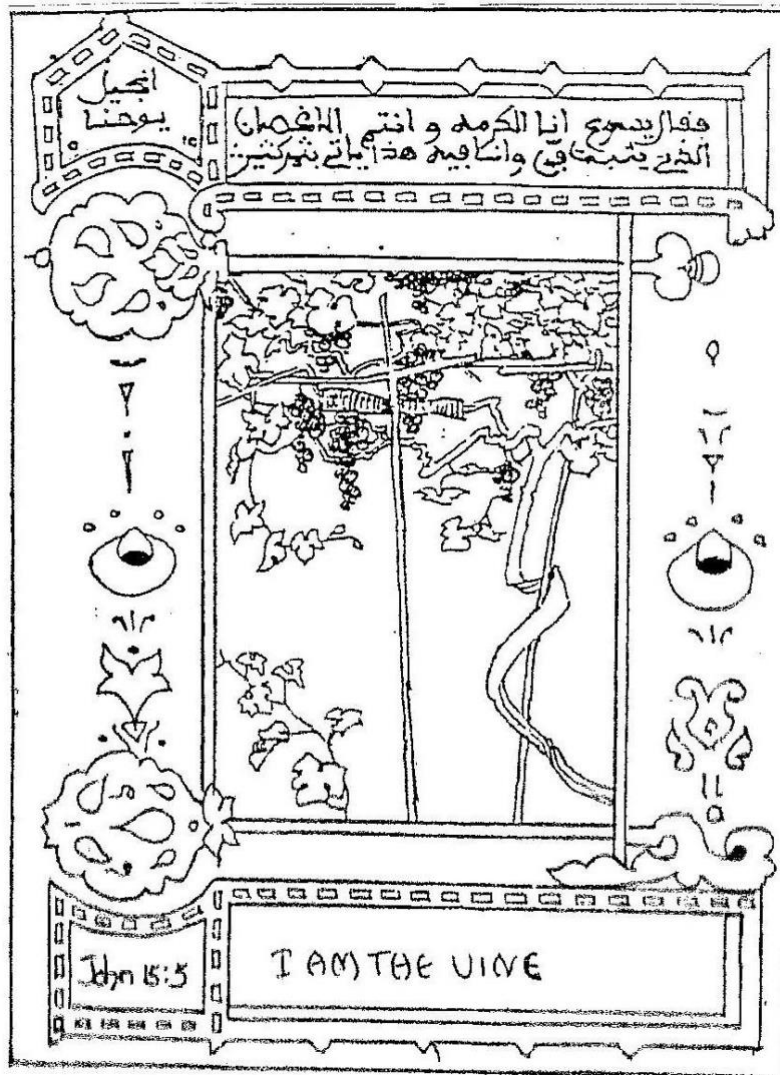
John 14:1–6

- 14:1 “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me.”
- 14:2 “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”
- 14:3 “And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”
- 14:4 “And you know the way where I am going.”
- 14:5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”
- 14:6 Jesus said to him, “**I am the way, and the truth, and the life**; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”

Reflection and Discussion

1. “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Which of the three nouns feels most important to your life situation? Which speaks to you most clearly of “progress”? Which do you wish you were more aware of—a path, a light, a strength?
2. Reflect on the differences between the construction and design of a ladder and the growth and design of a tree. How does this comparison illustrate God’s work in your life?
3. “*His [elder] brother does not teach him the way: he is the way.*” (p. 40, par. 5) How does this illustration of the elder brother resonate with you or someone you know?
4. How does Jesus’s claim “I am the truth” differ from the Sufi’s understanding of the nature of “truth”? (p. 40, par. 8) How does the illustration of algebra relate to the concept of truth? (p. 41, par. 1–2) What connections do you see between truth and light on the path?
5. In what three ways does Christ’s claim “I am the life” provide strength on the pathway?
6. What did Jesus want us to know about Himself through His claim “I am the way, the truth, and the life”?
7. Write (or speak) a one- or two-sentence statement of gratitude for/to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life.

The Secret of Abiding



“I Am the Vine”

Here in the last of the Parable secrets that we are studying, this lesson is taught us in a wonderful picture. It is the likeness of the vine whose current of sap flows through every branch that is knit into its stem, just as we read that “He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit” . . . as the sap fills all the little channels of the branch, making it alive with the life of the stem to its furthest tendrils, so is God’s purpose for our partaking of the Divine nature by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Way of the Sevenfold Secret (p. 44, par. 5)

Scripture

This “I am” is also found in Jesus’s dinner conversation with His disciples—the night before He died. He is preparing them, and in turn us, for a relationship of the spirit.

John 15:1–2, 4–5, 7–8

- 15:1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.”
- 15:2 “Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”
- 15:4 “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.”
- 15:5 “**I am the vine**, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”
- 15:6 “If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.”
- 15:7 “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.”
- 15:8 “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.”

Reflection and Discussion

1. Liliás describes the historical context for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, after Jesus’s death, resurrection, and ascension to a heavenly realm. Those gathered that day were filled, she says, with “*courage and wisdom and love*.” (p. 44, par. 3) Which of these virtues do you most desire and why? Have you received other evidences of God’s outpouring? Explain.
2. Liliás notes the longing of every Sufi to be brought into union with God. How does the “*secret of abiding*” as visualized in the “I am the vine” image picture this union with God? (p. 44, par. 5)
3. How is this “union” or “joining” achieved? Describe the physical act of “grafting” a branch unto vine. How does this parallel the spiritual act of becoming one with Christ? To be grafted into the vine, what is required to sever “the branch” from the past? (p. 45, par. 1–2)
4. How does “life eternal” as revealed in the Gospel differ from the Sufi’s understanding? (p. 44, par. 4)
5. Liliás affirms the security of the branch that has truly been grafted to the vine (Rom. 8:35, 37) but warns of certain dangers. What are those dangers, and how should we confront them? (p. 45, par. 2)
6. How does Liliás describe “*this state of abiding in Christ and He is us*”? What characteristics in Jesus’s life on earth are “*marks of His indwelling life*” in us? Under what conditions do these “fruits” ripen? (p. 46, par. 3) What evidence of this fruit do you see in yourself or in others whom you admire?
7. Write (or speak) a one- or two-sentence statement of gratitude for/to Jesus as the vine.