



The Higher Life

D a n P e d e r s e n



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Preface

I wrote this book at a time when my spiritual beliefs were derived solely from the Christian bible. Since that time, I've learned that the bible isn't as accurate or "authoritative" as I once thought.

Though I'm less certain now about some of the details expressed in this book, I still think it's a good message. It paints a picture of what I think God is like and how we should treat each other.

Dan Pedersen

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Introduction

This book is a product of my personal reflections on the Christian concept of “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”¹

Most Christians believe that Christ was God in the flesh, and that he’s the very presence of God within us. This is the view point I’ll be writing from. But I don’t discredit all other views. I’ve found that God’s signature is also on many other religious and spiritual beliefs.

I’ve chosen to use part of Paul’s letter to the Galatians as a framework for my reflections. I find that the entire Christian message is summed up in this one statement of his:

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”²

The Higher Life Is Not Lived By Us

“it is no longer I who live . . .”

By saying it was no longer he that lived, Paul meant that he had given up his own will and that the will of another was being carried out in him.

Paul had put his self-centered life to death. He considered himself dead to the temporal cares of his bodily existence. Although he was still alive in a bodily sense, his focus was to live by his *higher* self.

He still struggled with “sin,” but recognized that it wasn’t his *higher* self who wanted those things. He described it as something that resided in his body. And described himself as “the one who wants to do good”:

“So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.”¹

Part of him had a deep desire to do good, but another part caused him to do things he considered evil. This should sound familiar to most of us.

It’s a liberating thought to consider that a man who has been venerated as a Saint and credited with authoring content in a book regarded by many as holy scripture, was just like the rest of us.

It’s also inspiring to consider that he didn’t let it distort who he really was. He recognized that it wasn’t the real him who was doing evil things. That it was something within his bodily nature. And that his spiritual self wanted to do good.

Before Paul said “it is no longer I who live,” he first mentioned he had been “crucified with Christ.” We know he didn’t actually die on a cross with Christ. He was instead referring to something metaphorical. He explained it well in his letter to the Philippians:

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being

made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”²

The part that stands out to me is where he mentions that Christ “emptied Himself.” What this says to me is that Christ lived entirely dependent on God. Paul encouraged the Philippians to have this same attitude. One of absolute surrender to God.

When Paul said he had been “crucified with Christ,” he was saying he had emptied himself to the will of God. He no longer lived “according to the flesh”, but was now being “led by the Spirit of God.”³

And so it is with those of us who wish to live a higher life. We must surrender to God.

The Higher Life Is Within Us

“but Christ lives in me . . .”

We have a habit of trying to find fulfillment through things outside ourselves. Including through the thoughts and opinions of other people. Thomas Merton said it well in his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

“The logic of worldly success rests on a fallacy: the strange error that our perfection depends on the thoughts and opinions and applause of other men! A weird life it is, indeed, to be living always in somebody else’s imagination, as if that were the only place in which one could at last become real!”¹

The fulfillment we need, is located within us. As Steve McVey said in his book, *A Divine Invitation*, “God lives within you and desires that you not look to outside sources to fulfill you, but to look to Christ who resides within you.”²

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul stated that “the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” This union between God and man is our *higher* self. We are “partakers of the divine nature.”³

It’s not merely the memory of Christ’s life and what he represents that dwells within us. Nor is it merely principles derived from his teachings. Many Christians believe that Christ’s very spirit lives within the depths of their being.

This is also the meaning of the title “Son of God.” That is, he is the exact likeness of God. And since we are “partakers in the divine nature”, we too are sons and daughters of God. In the words of St Athanasius, “God became man so that man might become as God.”⁴

The thought of Christ living in us, is not an easy thought to digest. It’s difficult to describe through words alone. As Henri Nouwen once wrote, “words disclose the mystery of the silence from which they come.”⁵ It’s a mystery. A mystery that can feel more real than anything else we know, yet difficult to explain to other people.

The thought of Christ living in us, is not something that appeals to our intellect. It transcends intellectual comprehension. It’s a matter of the heart (spirit). It’s to “descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you.”⁶

Each of us can go to that quiet place within. As Henri Nouwen wrote:

“The real work of prayer is to become silent and listen to the voice that says good things about me. To gently push aside and silence the many voices that question my goodness and to trust that I will hear the voice of blessing.”⁷

Brennan Manning also said it well:

“The Holy Spirit moves us from the head to the heart, from intellectual cognition to experiential awareness. An inward stillness pervades our being, and the time of prayer is characterized by less rational reflection and speaking and more contemplative quiet and listening. Self-absorption fades into self-forgetfulness, as we fix our gaze on the brightness of the Lord.”⁸

This in-dwelling presence is truly a mystery. And any attempt to demystify it, puts us into a restless state of mind. Our striving will lead us nowhere, except to one end: the realization that the only thing we can do is surrender.

Manning again:

“Often trust begins on the far side of despair. When all human resources are exhausted, when the craving for assurance is stifled, when we forgo control, when we cease trying to manipulate God and demystify mystery, then—at our wits’ end—trust happens within us.”⁹

Our maturity develops in proportion to our willingness to surrender. This is the difference between living “according to the flesh” and being “led by the Spirit of God.”¹⁰ Our focus should be to yield to this inner presence, so that we can experience the transforming effect of becoming our true self.

The Higher Life Is A Place Of Rest

“and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God . . .”

Paul’s statement, “I live by faith in the Son of God” means that he relied on Christ’s presence to guide him. If you look at this verse in the King James version, it reads a bit differently: “I live by the faith of the Son of God.” Faith *in*, becomes faith *of*.

This is consistent with other verses in the New Testament, such as Hebrews 12:2, which says that Christ is the “author and perfecter of faith.” This makes faith something to be yielded to, rather than something to be manufactured by us. It’s a matter of trusting in God’s faithfulness toward us.

This trust gives us the confidence to stop trying to reach perfection through our own efforts and simply rest in God’s love. Life is not about self-sufficiency, it’s about self-realization.

Thomas Merton sums it up well:

“Without the silence and recollection of the interior life, man loses contact with his real sources of energy, clarity and peace. When he tries to be his own god and insists on keeping his hands on everything, remembering everything and controlling everything, he drives himself to ruin. For when man thinks himself powerful, then at every moment he is in desperate need; he is in need of knowledge, strength, control, and he depends on countless instruments. But when man remembers the unfailing power of God and realizes that because he is the son of God, this power already belongs to him, then he does not have to think anymore about the things he needs. For what he needs will be given him when he needs it, and in this sense, God will think and act for him.”¹

The Higher Life Is A Place Of Unconditional Love

“who loved me . . .”

By stating that Christ loved him, Paul was referring to something different from the type of love common to human relationships. He was referring to Christ's crucifixion. In other words, he was saying that Christ loved him so much that he died in his place.

This is a very personal statement. As the sacrifice of Christ wasn't only for Paul, but for everyone. He wasn't being egocentric. He felt that Christ loved him so much that he was willing to die even for him.

The idea that God was “in Christ reconciling the world Himself”¹ is tough to swallow, because of the enormity of its claim. It includes people like Paul, but also all of history's villains. That's not to say that they're all sitting in heaven having a cup of tea. But they *might* be. Because we've all been villains in our own way.

If God has reconciled the whole world to himself, this would include all the world's villains. I don't believe a loving God would cast anyone into a place of eternal torment. But stubborn souls may very well send themselves to such a place.

The message of reconciliational love is not necessarily that everyone will be in heaven. It's that everyone is invited. The only thing required is *acceptance* of the invitation. Transportation and *transformation* will be provided!

Here's a great explanation by Robert Farrar Capon:

“. . . when the Gospel is proclaimed, it stays light-years away from reliance on success or on any other exercise of right-handed power. Instead, it relies resolutely on left-handed power—on the power that, in a mystery, works through failure, loss, and death. And so while our history is indeed saved, its salvation is not made manifest in our history in any obvious, right-handed way. In God's time—in that *kairos*, that due season, that *high time* in which the Incarnate Word brings in the kingdom in a mystery—all our times are indeed reconciled and restored *now*. But in *our* time—in the *chronos*, the sequential order of earthly events the *low time* of days, years, centuries, and millennia—the shipwreck of history drags on unchanged and unchangeable *now*. And the only bridge between the *now* in which our times are triumphantly in his hand and the *now* in which they are so disastrously in our own is *faith*. The accomplished reconciliation can only be believed; it cannot be known, felt

or seen—and it cannot, by any efforts of ours, however good or however successful, be rendered visible, tangible, or intelligible.”²

This is why we shouldn't judge the fate of others. We're not capable of making such judgments accurately. We're addicted to what Capon described as “right-handed power.” Which is our desire to be judge, jury, and executioner.

Many of us still believe that everyone should get what they deserve. But if it were true that everyone should get what they deserve, we would all go to hell in a hand-basket.

Our relationship with God can't be based on moral behavior. It can only be based on the goodness of God. Thankfully, access to heaven is not determined by good behavior. Otherwise, God's love would be no different from the finicky love often expressed by humans.

God's love turns our idea of love on its head. Paul's world was turned upside down by it. So much so that he went from being a persecutor of Christians to a follower himself. A follower who was persecuted by the very type of people he used to associate with. He was beaten and imprisoned several times for his faith, and was eventually executed.

Paul's sufferings were likely no surprise to him. He understood that the ways of the world were opposed to the ways of faith. He was like many other followers of Christ throughout history. An example of what Christ meant by “a slave is not greater than his master.”³ In other words, *if they persecute me, they will persecute you too for being my disciple.*

A lot of negative things have been said about the way criminals were treated in the past. Especially in ancient times. But although the *methods* have changed, the *attitude* remains basically the same. Even with our sensitivity for human rights, we still treat law breakers by means of punishment. Whether they be violators of state laws or religious laws.

Human love has always been conditional. We impose conditions for love and forgiveness. And for some people, there's *no* forgiveness. By our standards, God's love is foolish, even insane. Because a God who forgives even the most atrocious acts, is not the type of God we would be if we were God. By our standards, God is out of his mind. Or at least, at odds with what any reasonable person would consider fair.

The Higher Life Is A Place Of Self-Forgetfulness

“and gave Himself up for me.”

What Paul reveals here, is how significant Christ's crucifixion was to him. And that Christ had forfeited something on his behalf.

We read in the New Testament, that God used Christ's execution as the ultimate demonstration of love. What makes it the ultimate act of love is that the innocent gave up his life for the guilty.

How often do we ignore the rules, and focus on love? We tend to control each other with fear, instead letting love guide our decisions. If we weren't so focused on ourselves, we wouldn't be so fearful. And we would allow each other more freedom.

Love is an act of self-forgetfulness. But this *giving up of self*, doesn't happen through willpower. It's not something we can *achieve*. It's the opposite of achievement. But it is a *choice*. A choice to let go of fear and trust love.

Our lives are an emptying of our false self and a realization of our true, *higher* self. Our lives are a connection with divine love. And that's what it means to be a “Servant of God”. It means to be a servant of love.

Conclusion

Here are a few parting verses to help tie this together:

“The whole point of what we’re urging is simply love—love uncontaminated by self-interest and counterfeit faith, a life open to God.”¹

“The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you, therefore you can look forward to sharing in God’s glory. It’s that simple. That is the substance of our message.”²

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