A life pays itself out like a plumb line in a windstorm—always wishing to stay straight and true, but bowing to the insistent demands of the gale as it reaches for the one, true point. Life has a way of telling the truth through a series of small inconsistencies that keep us perilously off-balance, always reaching for something straight and solid, while never quite understanding the twists and turns of the life in which we have been set.

Man is a blithe spirit borne down by the weight of flesh—a soul desperately in search of freedom. He is created with a longing for someone larger than himself, someone who (unlike him) does not dwell on quicksand. He longs for someone with a surer footing and strong arms.

Life is the spirit's never-ending search for a way out of its corporeal bonds.

# Ising oward the Bright Sweetness

"By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." Genesis 3:19

Human LIFE IS A QUEST—a quest up from the soil that fills our veins, toward the purity of heaven. The problem is, for most of mankind's time on earth, humans have defined a multitude of different heavens, each imagined and crafted into a comfortable dwelling place for a multitude of eternities.

There *was* a point in time when there was heaven on earth. For a brief moment, paradise dwelt upon the dust of earth, and man and woman enjoyed a blissful, perfect harmony

with God. But then the dust from which they had been made drew back from God—like its cousin, gravity—to pull them into the deceitful clutches of one who had once been beautiful, but was now the epitome of dark evil.

In one dark, ugly moment, heaven left the leaden gravity of earth, not to return until sin and its father had been forever vanquished. Between these two points in time—between the bliss of Eden and the New Jerusalem—man and woman would be condemned to be born in sin, creatures of depravity, spirits condemned to the claustrophobic woolen cloak of the flesh, longing for the bright sweetness they had once enjoyed.



Issue #126 May 2001

## The Decision

There is poverty in the United States, but it is a poverty on such a higher level than the poverty in other parts of the world that it should, in all fairness, not presume to borrow the same word. Those typically situated within the 'poverty' level of our society may still enjoy a home, a car in the drive, a color television glowing into the night. Their children get an education, and, if they choose, the adults have employment. And for those few who are truly living on the baseline, there are usually any number of government or private services available for their relief.

Poverty in other countries—especially Third World countries-meets the truer definition of the word. A peasant family eking out survival from a tin-roofed hovel on the outskirts of Mexico City, or clinging to the Santa Marta hillside overlooking Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, has slim hope of climbing even to the level of US poverty—a level of relative wealth of which they can only dream. The dirt-caked children playing in the dust outside their family's mud brick dwelling in Egypt, or those who scavenge for food and saleable rags in Cairo's city dump, will never receive an education, never live in a furnished apartment, never own a car or draw a fair salary for a day's work

By contrast, in the United States there are always possibilities. We really do not have a 'peasant' class, since, by the measure of other lands such as India or Russia, we do not have a class-structured society. Change is always possible; in the US, one is not necessarily destined to die in the station to which one was born. (We do, thanks to liberals, have class envy in the US, but that is another thing entirely.)

In a free, democratic republic, such as the United States today, change is not only possible, but almost inevitable. One *does* rise, one generally does become more tomorrow than what one is today. One is not born into a permanent, societal station.

And no matter the country of one's birth, one is not necessarily destined to remain in the sin-laden dust from which one is born. Man and woman are born into sin, into earthbound depravity, but that need not be a permanent condition. The spirit of a man (if not his body) dwells in a free, democratic republic, where tomorrow always holds out the possibility for change. One may be born into abject spiritual poverty, but one need not remain there.

Sadly, many do make the choice to remain where they are, stuck in the muck of their own birth. They have turned a deaf ear to the cries of their soul, listening instead to the Siren song of the earth from which they sprang. Like their parents, Adam and Eve, they have blindly reasoned that they know better than the Spirit that beckons them upward.

The beginning of change is the decision to make it. The Spirit comes into the heart of man to ignite a longing for God—a longing not

just for redemption, but for something better; not just for holiness, but for a higher plane. There is something better, and God knows what it is. But man and woman must decide whether they will live with God on His higher plane, or remain stuck in the foul muck of earth.

Without question, it is a mystery, and difficult for the temporal mind to grasp. God is all-powerful and all-knowing; He knows the way of every individual ever born. Yet—and here is the mystery—man is still a free agent. God is not a

gangster forcing His will at gunpoint, but a wise Father offering a better way. A wise dad counsels and influences his teenage children; he corrects and chastises when they do wrong, but he also recognizes the folly in dictatorship. The wise parent dictates the way of a two-year-old, but allows the eighteen-year-old to become bruised by his own decisions, learning the hard lessons that will, ultimately, develop character. The dad understands the risk: the child may not seek higher ground, but be lost to the enticements of earth and flesh. But it is a necessary risk, for without learning self-determination the child will never grow up at all.

God is nothing if not a wise dad. He is not interested in raising up brain-numb weaklings who must be told everything to do, but desires the fellowship of bruised-but-mature adults who have consciously made the decision for Him.

When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth. Psalm 104:28-30

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## A Love Affair with the Iamilian

A DECISION MADE FOR GOD THROUGH CHRIST is not, in itself, a decision to also rise out of the tenacious bonds of the earth. Redemption is not sanctification; justification is not holiness.

Most believers have only a pale vision of the rich, deeply colored tapestry that God has planned for their life. Most Christians are either ignorant of the existence of the higher life—or have consciously decided to avoid it. Man and woman have so filled their built-in longing with other things, there is no room left for the one for whom it was created. As the landlord of his person, man has filled the rooms of his life with the accoutrements of a lower plane: corporate ambition, physical pleasure, acquisition of wealth, and the warm glow of human relationships. But in those who already know Christ,

The work of God is not finished in the

heart and life of the new believer when

the first act of inward adjustment has

given him a sense of cleansing and for-

giveness, peace and rest for the first time

The Spirit would go on from there to

bring the total life into harmony with

that blissful "center." This is wrought in

the believer by the Word of God and

It could be done by a short course in

things spiritual if we were more pliable, less self-willed and stubborn; but it usu-

ally takes some time before we learn

the hard lessons of faith and obedience

sufficiently well to permit the work to

be done in us with anything near to

perfection. A.W. Tozer

prayer and discipline and suffering.

in his life!

that longing is often filled with an insidious roomer known as 'religion.'

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. James 1:27

Religion removed from its pristine state, as practiced by believers the world over, has degenerated into the activity of 'playing church.' We so busy ourselves with the activity that is expected from a Christian, that we have separated ourselves from the Spiritual

engine meant to drive it. Here is a partial list of real weekly activities taken from the mailout of a modestly large evangelical church:

Monday – EFL & Citizenship classes

Monday - Deacon Board meeting

Tuesday - EFL & Citizenship classes

Tuesday - Spanish Class

Tuesday - G & H Circle

Wednesday - New Bible Study in Spanish

Wednesday – Supper

Sunday - Sanctity of Human Life

Sunday - Growing Kids God's Way

Sunday - Deaconess meeting

Add to this all the other committee meetings, all the various choir and ensemble

practices, play rehearsals, nursery and greeter assignments, visitation, and, oh yes, worship. Soon the local church presents a rosy, contented, self-satisfied picture of busy activity 'for the Lord'—but, curiously, the Lord Himself is nowhere to be found.

The fault lies—as is so often the case—not with the activities themselves, or even their calendar-stuffing number, but with the pervasive philosophy they can represent, that busyness equals nearness to God. It is appropriate for the leadership in a church to create opportunities for the saints to use their gifts in service to the Lord. The one gifted with financial expertise should be involved in balancing the church's checkbook; the one gifted to help children grow into adults should indeed be involved with the youth group. But service is not synonymous with holy communion, and potluck dinners are not synonymous with worship.

The plain truth is that man has always had a love affair with the familiar, the comfortable, the seen. God then comes in and says, "I want you to have a relationship with Me—but it will be based not on flesh, but on spirit. I want you to love Me—but you may not look upon Me. It will be a love affair of faith, not sight." And his demands make us uneasy, for we are people of the earth, people of flesh, and many of us are uncomfortable with even our own spirit—much less His.

So we cling to what we know: doing, rather than being. It is far easier to join a committee, or serve coffee at the social, than to have an intimate relationship with an invisible God. And, as a result, our faith becomes rootbound—not rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, but rooted into the familiar soil from which we came, and thus firmly anchored in the plane He is inviting us to leave.

The higher life begins with understanding that a foot in the door is not the same as dwelling inside; buying a ticket for entrance through the Pearly Gates is not the same as living a life comfortable with what is inside.

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## Adaptation Over Immutability

ORDINARILY, PEOPLE SEEM TO FAVOR Consistency over change. In politics the incumbent typically wins; in institutions the inventive idea is often met with, "That's not how we do things around here." In churches we want to hold onto pastors who have been there a long time, preferring their known foibles over anyone unfamiliar. And in our own life most of us will prefer the old familiar routine over anything new and potentially inconvenient.

It seems to be a part of our culture, established even in the minds of the young. Paging through one of my old high school yearbooks, try as I might I cannot find any notations that say, "I look forward to seeing what you become," or, "I just bet you will have changed for the better in twenty years." Instead I find the saccharine litany, "Good luck to a great guy!" and, "Always stay as you are—never change," and, "You're a great kid, so stay that way!"

Well, I can say with some accuracy that after thirty-four years, I have most definitely changed: in some respects for the worse, but mostly for the better. I may have substantially added to my girth, and deducted from my pate, but thank goodness I am no longer that pimply faced class clown, chronically unsteady around the fairer sex, and more interested in extracurricular activities than actually *learning* anything.

Oddly, however, man seems to take a different tack when establishing a relationship with God. While in our more mundane living we favor consistency over change, in our dealings with God we favor adaptation over immutability. Uncomfortable with His eternally unchanging character, we set out to re-mold Him into our own image.

We live in a world that, if it cares about God at all, cares only to redefine Him into a benevolent buddy who abides by *its* standards. Instead of seeking a God who exists on His own terms—a God who can offer a firm foundation against the quicksand of man's society—this world seeks only to pursue a God of its own making.

Many people doggedly avoid any search for God for fear of what they'll find at their goal. The result of their search will surely be uncomfortable, they surmise, and certainly inconvenient. God the Father is too holy and detached, they assume, and Jesus the Son is too dated to be of any use to this present age.

Their ignorance aside, the believer cannot thrust a bony finger of condemnation at the world without first pointing it at himself. Sadly, this reluctance to take God as He is has a comfortable dwelling place even within the body of Christ.

So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Jeremiah 18:3-4

The bright sweetness of God cannot be enjoyed after it has been dulled by any of the earth's darkness. Indeed, by such treatment it is rendered unrecognizable. And it is the height of man's arrogance to presume to refashion an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal God. To remake God is to reduce Him (in the mind) to a small god—that is, no God at all, but a mere idol. Of what earthly good is a God fashioned from the soil? What profit is there in rising toward someone already lower than oneself? For whatever is fashioned by man is something lower than he who made it; the creator is always superior to the thing created.

To change God from what He is, is to set man above Him. And any attempt to change Him is to say, "I will remain who I am, and bring God down to my level." To change God is to reverse the universal order of our being, for in His universe, *He* is the one who creates and refashions.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this

Much of our difficulty as seeking Christians stems from our unwillingness to take God as He is and adjust our lives accordingly. We insist upon trying to modify Him and to bring Him nearer to our own image. The flesh whimpers against the rigor of God's inexorable sentence and begs like Agag for a little mercy, a little indulgence of its carnal ways. It is no use. We can get a right start only by accepting God as He is and learning to love Him for what He is. As we go on to know Him better we shall find it a source of unspeakable joy that God is just what He is. Some of the most rapturous moments we know will be those we spend in reverent admiration of the Godhead. In those holy moments the very thought of change in Him will be too painful to endure.

So let us begin with God. Back of all, above all, before all is God; first in sequential order, above in rank and station, exalted in dignity and honor.

Tozer

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potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." Jeremiah 18:5-6

God *does* stoop to our level—as He did most dramatically at the cross—but it is only to reach down and lift us up to Him. He will not be soiled by the earth—that was the *point* of the cross. His desire is to bring us into the paradise of His dwelling—to restore the bright sweetness He once enjoyed with His creation.

We may squander our precious opportunities for communion by vainly trying to modify God's personality and character. We may remain stiff-lipped and arrogant, demanding that He bow to our wishes. We may remain stubborn and resolute, waiting for Him to reconcile His precepts to our more manageable traditions. But in that we will ultimately lose, and God will remain what He always has been: unchanged.

## Porn With The Yearning

The Longing is There. In some it may be papered over, or suffering under five coats of hard enamel paint; it may have been stuffed back into the pile of mildewed sneakers and old T-shirts turned into rags, that has taken over the

furthest recesses of a longforgotten closet; it may have been banished to the coal bin buried in the basement—but the longing is still there, in every person, waiting to once again see the light of day.

There is something in every person that longs to rise higher than the dirt at his or her feet. Some may become sidetracked in their quest, following down some rabbit trail leading to nowhere, but others have identified the goal of their quest, and have set out down the straight path.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ lesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so. somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or

have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Philippians 3:7-12

The longing to rise is not something detached, a mere wisp of vapor floating about in the ether, or an abstract concept, first lost and later found, in the journals of the past. It is not something that must be discovered, then nurtured or learned, as a brand new idea that surprises. The longing does not begin outside of ourselves, but begins within.

In a believer, the Holy Spirit also dwells within. But that fruitful companion was someone from without who, in a grand moment, became part of the person professing Christ. No one—not even a believer—is born with the Spirit inside, but He is a gift from the Father, received at the moment Christ is believed. The *longing*, however, is a part of us from the womb. We are born with the yearning for God—even if we, in our ignorance, do not know it for what it truly is.

The longing, though congenital, may still surprise. It comes upon us during moments of wonder and grace, moments of rapture tinged with the spiritual. It may take our breath away in moments we understand, but that are too wonderful to contain, such as moments when we cradle our newborn child, or gaze upon the face of a loved one just passed. Because all of nature is His, it very often comes upon us when we are surrounded by those things for which man is not responsible, such as during a stroll in the early morning wonder of God's creation.

We carry it within. It is as much a part of us as our first breath. To reject it is the same as to cut off an arm or gouge out an eye. To embrace it is to accept the fact that we are forever incomplete without God.

Among the famous sayings of the church fathers, none is better known than Augustine's, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."

The great saint states here in few words the origin and interior history of the human race. God made us for Himself-this is the only explanation that satisfies the heart of a thinking man, whatever his wild reason may say. Should faulty education and perverse reasoning lead a man to conclude otherwise, there is little that any Christian can do for him. For such a man I have no message. My appeal is addressed to those who have been previously taught in secret by the wisdom of God. I speak to thirsty hearts whose longings have been wakened by the touch of God within them, and such as they need no reasoned proof. Their restless hearts furnish all the proof they need.

God formed us for His pleasure, and so formed us that we, as well as He, can, in divine communion, enjoy the sweet and mysterious mingling of kindred personalities. He meant us to see Him and live with Him and draw our life from His smile.

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### The Sound of Lis Clory

The EARLY MORNING AIR WAS CRISP AND CLEAN. After a night unseasonably cold, my breath was visible, caught in the sharp first rays of the sun. Wisps of vaporous steam rose from the surface of the pond—its placid waters still full from the last thunderstorm. Though the sounds of machines could be heard coming from the distant highway, it was yet a tranquil setting—the first sounds being not the machines, but the contented calls of myriad birds.

I was on one more jaunt to release one more mouse from the confines in which it found itself after being found out in the house. Though the bright-eyed pests now had every reason to remain outside, I was still having to continue my catch-and-release program. And while I wasn't any too thrilled with the idea of more mice in the house, I was beginning to enjoy these early morning strolls to the woods.

During the winter I had crunched atop packed snow and ice, bundled against the frigid conditions. But now I could slow my pace, breathe in the earthy aromas of fresh spring, listen to the chorus of winged neighbors celebrating the dawn. The deer were still plentiful, prancing off into the underbrush when surprised by my footsteps, always scolding my impertinence with a harsh snort. This morning, too, with the air just a bit warmer and the sun piercing golden rays through the dew-sparkled grass, I trudged up the drive to release yet another furry invader. And the chorus of winged visitors crescendoed in greeting, filling the tranquil morning with the sound of fluttering angel wings.

...because that which is known about God is evident among them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. Romans 1:19-20 nasb

Who in his right mind can deny God when faced with such overwhelming evidence! Who can turn away from His grandeur, or His kind condescension? Who, but a fool, could deny Him a place in their heart?

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. Psalm 19:1-4a niv

(from Reflections by the Pond)\*

## Naked Refore God

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground..." God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the

heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

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And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Genesis 1:1,27-28,31-2:1,8-9,15-17,25

THE RISING TAKES PLACE only in the painful transparency of abject humility. Before man there may be some small merit in hiding the full measure of the heart's content, but before God the gates of the heart must be swung wide, and its contents spilled out into the glare of light. Thus emptied of the weight of our duplicity and conceit, we begin to rise.

And it is just this weight—the full weight of our own glorification—that binds us so tenaciously in the grip of the soil. Our mind understands what is missing; our deep longing hungers for the bliss of what it once knew. But

the heart remains closed upon its dark contents, fearing the examination of the bright light.

One Sunday morning a gentleman—a church elder—sat in on our Bible study, one in which we were discussing prayer. He asked after the nature and duration of our own prayers, then, before we could answer, volunteered that his own were brief, pithy, and to the point. "Lord, here is a bullet list of my concerns, typed up in triplicate for your convenience. Thank you very much. Good day." He didn't see why much more than that was necessary.

Here was a man buried up to his knees in the soil of the earth.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'
"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his

breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a

sinner:" Luke 18:10-13

Every prayer should be at least one step higher toward the bright sweetness. It is a long journey, but small steps count. Every prayer should be an emptying of the heart's contents, a humble revealing of a sinner's dependency on God. Only then do we begin to experience even a small part of the glorious communion man and woman once enjoyed with their Creator.

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Luke 18:14

And the longing does not wait for the prayer on bended knee, but considers the person as a whole, inhaling the hours and minutes of a life and exhaling them up to God. Man and woman are born with an emptiness that can only be filled by their Maker, and a longing to rise up from the soil of their birth to meet with Him in a better place—not a place awaiting their ultimate demise, but a place available to them even now, in the Garden of His presence.

work will be as sacred as the work of the ministry. It is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular, it is why he does it. The motive is everything. Let a man sanctify the Lord God in his heart and he can thereafter do no common act. All he does is good and acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For such a man, living itself will be a priestly ministration. As he performs his never-so-simple task, he will hear the voice of the seraphim saying, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory."

Let every man abide in the calling wherein he is called and his

Lord of all being, throned a-far, Thy glory flames from sun and star; Center and soul of every sphere, Yet to each loving heart how near!

Sun of our life, Thy quickening ray Sheds on our path the glow of day; Star of our hope, Thy softened light Cheers the long watches of the night. Our midnight is Thy smile withdrawn; Our noontide is Thy gracious dawn; Our rainbow arch, Thy mercy's sign; All, save the clouds of sin, are Thine.

Grant us Thy truth to make us free, And kindling hearts that burn for Thee; Till all Thy living altars claim One holy light, one heavenly flame. Oliver Wendell Holmes



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