

## Fullness of Life

### by Rev. Dr. Bill Young

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Colossians 2:6-15

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His name was Paul. Not the Apostle Paul of the New Testament. This Paul was one of my best friends during our high school years in Ponca City, Oklahoma. We were part of a group of guys who hung out together, playing tennis, golf and touch football, and generally goofing around, as teenagers do. Paul and I even got into a bit of trouble during the last week of our senior year, but we don't need to go there.

Paul was an excellent student. He earned Ph. D.s in both math and computer science and had a distinguished career working in the emerging field of artificial intelligence. I had a number of very bright friends in high school. Without question, Paul was the smartest.

I had not seen Paul for a number of years when, one Fall weekend, my high school buddies reunited in Lawrence, Kansas to attend a football game. The University of Oklahoma Sooners were playing the Kansas University Jayhawks. All my friends, except for me, had gone to OU, and we gathered in Lawrence because one in the group was a team physician for KU. The Sooners won, as they usually did when playing the Jayhawks, and we all had a great time.

That evening, after the game, Paul and I were sitting on our friends' deck, reminiscing about the good old days. Out of the blue, Paul asked me, "Bill why do you believe in God?" At first I tried to make light of his question, telling Paul, "Because it's in my job description." "No, really," he responded, "why do you believe in God?" Then I got defensive. Paul liked to argue, and he was good at it. "He's probably trying to set me up," I thought. "I'll answer, then he'll belittle my faith in God and tell me that people with any brains are atheists who believe not in God but in logic and science." I tried to change the subject, but Paul was insistent. "Bill," he said emphatically, "why are you so reluctant to talk about your faith in God?" I could feel my face growing flush. He was right. Why did I find it difficult to talk openly about my faith?

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? A friend, who does not believe in God, asks you why you do, and you are not sure how to respond? When I realized Paul was serious, I looked him in the eye and said, "Why are you asking me this, Paul? What's going on?" I could sense that Paul's concern was more than intellectual, that there was something happening in his life causing him to ask me about my faith.

In retrospect, I'm glad I responded that way. Paul was struggling and he clearly wanted to talk about it. He said, "Bill, I thought my life was going well, but I feel increasingly lost. My marriage is falling apart; my wife is leaving me. I've done some things about which I am not proud. I feel guilty and ashamed. I'm in a fascinating, cutting edge field of research, but my work no longer seems to be as fulfilling as it once was. I have plenty of money, and can buy pretty much anything I want, but things are not bringing me lasting satisfaction. I don't know

which way to turn, and I thought you might be able to give me some guidance. Why do you believe in God?"

When he finished, I shared with Paul, as simply and frankly as I could, my faith journey. I told him that I too had passed through difficult periods when I felt a profound emptiness. But those times have passed, I said, and, when they do, I feel a renewed sense of meaning and purpose, and the redemptive power of love. I believe, I said to Paul, that this love comes from God, the ultimate reality in the universe. I told Paul I believed God is most vividly and perfectly known to us through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of God's son, Jesus Christ. I said I often experience the love of God in Christ through other people—family, friends, and fellow church members. I told Paul that God for me is not an idea, or concept, or a puzzle that I needed to try to figure out. God is a very real power and presence in my life, in whom, I believe, as Scripture says, we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), a force as real as the air we breathe and the water we drink and just as essential for life. A prayer of St. Augustine that I discovered during one of the times when I felt spiritually lost, came to me, and I shared it with Paul. St. Augustine prayed, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, O Lord." (repeat). (First paragraph of Augustine's *Confessions*).

Then I told Paul that some of my colleagues who teach science at Westminster College had been inspired in their faith journeys by Francis Collins, the noted physician and geneticist, now director of the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Collins converted from atheism to Christianity as a young doctor. He said he was moved to embrace Christianity by observing how faith in Christ helped many of his patients and their families cope with suffering and death. Dr. Collins has become one of the leaders of the movement that emphasizes the harmony to be found in the perspectives of science and faith. In his book *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, Dr. Collins wrote, "In this modern era of cosmology, evolution, and the human genome, is there still the possibility of a richly satisfying harmony between the scientific and spiritual worldviews? I answer with a resounding yes! In my view, there is no conflict in being a rigorous scientist and a person who believes in a God who takes a personal interest in each one of us. Science's domain is to explore nature. God's domain is in the spiritual world, a realm not possible to explore with the tools and language of science. It must be examined with the heart, the mind, and the soul—and the mind must find a way to embrace both realms."

Paul and I talked for a while longer. When we were called to dinner Paul thanked me for sharing my faith journey, and for not being judgmental of him. He said he would think about what I had said. I told him I would pray for him. We did not have a chance to talk further that evening, and I did not see Paul again until years later.

That experience made me aware that I was not as prepared as I needed to be to talk openly about my faith in God with others, that I needed to spend more time grounding myself in the basic story of spiritual longing and fulfillment found in Scripture. It's good to commit to memory and be able to quote specific Bible verses, but I believe more important is letting the power of the biblical narrative flow through us, the story of God's making us in the divine image, not abandoning us when we fall short of how God calls us to live, and redeeming us through the sacrifice of God's Son. Nor do we have to interpret the Bible literally in order to know and to share its transformative message. As George Bernard Shaw once said, "Taking the Bible literally is like sitting down for a meal and eating the menu." Menus point us toward the food

that will sustain us, just as the Bible leads us to the life giving power of the Word of God, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, who, as we will affirm this morning when we share the Sacrament of Holy Communion, is the bread of life.

We read this morning a passage from a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a group of Christians at Colossae in Asia Minor. Some in the Colossian fellowship had drifted away from their Christian faith. They had fallen prey to a school of thought that claimed to reveal the mysteries of existence. The Apostle does not name the philosophy; he simply calls it "an empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe" (Colossians 2:8). We do not know for sure just what teaching was luring Colossian Christians away from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whatever it was, the doctrine must have promised "fullness of life" to those who embraced it. There is much in our own times that could be labeled "empty deceptions" that promise fullness of life but fails to deliver. Perhaps the most seductive is the so called "good life" based on the desire to acquire material possessions and the drive to be number one, at the top of the heap, in all our pursuits. In the last sermon he preached before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of this compulsion, calling it the "drum major instinct." "We all want to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction, to lead the parade," Dr. King said.

The Apostle Paul wanted the Colossians to understand that these drop outs from their fellowship had turned their back on the path to a truly fulfilling life. The foundation for a life of real meaning and purpose, the Apostle told them, is not some human teaching, however sophisticated, but a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In Christ God is fully present, Paul reminded the Colossians. In Christ they have come to a true fullness of life. In Christ they have passed from death to life. How could they substitute a fulfilling Christ-centered life for one based on "empty deceit"? How could they let themselves be beguiled by the smooth pitch of proponents of a lifestyle that is not fulfilling? Dr. King said in his last sermon that there is nothing wrong with the instinct to excel. "Don't give it up," he said. "Keep feeling the need for being important. Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be first in love. I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity."

The next time I heard from my friend Paul he told me he had been diagnosed with cancer. After researching treatment options, he had decided to come from his home in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, to Columbia for surgery at Boone Hospital. Sue and I invited him to stay with us during his initial recovery. That gave us the opportunity to talk about the journey Paul said he had begun that evening years before when we had talked at our friends' house in Lawrence, Kansas. Paul told me that after our conversation he had begun, for the first time since he was a child, to read the Bible. He also had begun to attend a church, and he joined a Bible study.

Paul said that during one of the Bible study sessions he had come upon a passage from the 30th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy (30:15-20). In these verses, which we read this morning, Moses was speaking to the people of Israel just before they entered the promised land, telling them they faced a decisive decision, a clear choice between life and death. If you love the Lord your God, walk in God's ways and observe the Lord's commandments, you will live, Moses said. But if you allow yourself to be led astray, to bow down and serve other gods, you will perish. My friend Paul said that when he encountered this passage, he felt it was

directed to him. Through faith in God's love in Jesus Christ he had, Paul truly believed, chosen life.

Paul recovered after the cancer surgery, and he and his second wife, a woman who shared his faith, had some wonderful years together. He remained active in his church. I talked with Paul occasionally, and it was obvious that he was leading a fulfilling life, founded on his growing and deepening faith in Christ.

Then, some years later, I learned that Paul had been diagnosed with a different form of cancer, one with a very low cure rate. He fought courageously, but succumbed to the disease. In a conversation shortly before he passed away, Paul told me that he was not afraid to die, that he knew when he left this life he would be with Christ. He cried when he spoke of how difficult it was for him to leave his wife and others he loved. But then he said something I will always remember, "Bill, I am so grateful that, after running away for so long, I found what life is really all about—love, God's love, the love God has for us all in Christ, a love that will never die."

I admired Paul when we were in high school together. As I said, he was one of the smartest people I have ever known. However, I came to respect Paul at a much deeper level. He faced up to the reality that he was on a path based on empty deceit, a life apart from God, leading ultimately to spiritual death. He acknowledged his need to change directions; he accepted God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. He had indeed chosen life, a Christ-centered life of love. As can we all, when we accept God's grace through faith in Christ, my friend Paul had truly experienced fullness of life.

Now unto the One who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of God's glory, with exceeding joy; to the only wise Go our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power both now and forever. Amen.

Let us pray. Gracious and Loving God, all that we have and all that we are is your gift to us. Inspire us to share the gifts we have received from your hand with others, especially those most in need in our world. You call us to live fulfilling lives, as citizens of Christ's kingdom. In Christ's name, we rededicate ourselves now to live as his servants. In his name we pray. Amen.