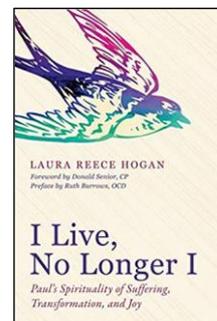


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I Live, No Longer I – Paul's Spirituality of Suffering, Transformation, and Joy

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Introduction : Paul in Prison

Part of the human condition is colliding with pain, with things we do not control, with things we would change if we could. To me, one of the more profound questions is: how do the inevitable suffering, loss, and death we experience interconnect with life and the divine?

I have come to experience that one of the gifts of Jesus Christ is the way his life shows us that all aspects of our lives even the dark and painful parts we would rather exclude or forget, are included and embraced by the divine. We are not alone in the dark places, and in fact God uses those dark places in mysterious ways for his unexpected and effective purposes. Paul discovered and wanted to teach us that not only was the cross of Jesus Christ a paradox, but this very same paradox threads through the experience of all Christian life. Ironically what may seem to be death is paradoxically life, what may seem to be defeat is paradoxically victory, that may seem to be loss is paradoxically gain, and all Christian experience flows through this strange but powerful paradigm.

Philippians 2.6-11

Paul describes Jesus in three moments of self-emptying or *kenosis*, being with us or *enosis*, and divine unity or *theosis*. But Paul didn't stop there. He perceived that in the same way he was "no longer, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20), a parallel pattern was to be expressed in and through the life of Paul himself, and in and through the lives of all Christians pursuing "the goal, the prize of God's upward calling in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14).

When we are in the excruciating midst of pain and loss, we have a very hard time thinking of anything except when and how the pain will stop. Paul grasped that the cross of Jesus Christ offered a radically new way to perceive and experience suffering... Paul came to realize that his most urgent pastoral task was to teach his people to shift their perspective, to perceive divine effectiveness, to experience a new unity with Jesus Christ in and through all aspects of their lives, even suffering.

Chapter 1: De-Centering and Divine Presence

Much of what we experience as life is the ebb and flow of relationship – with ourselves, with other human beings, and with the divine. These three relationships form the core of not simply life, but also life lived in accordance with the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord, you God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourselves." You are to love God, your neighbor, and yourself. The theological trick of this threesome is that if you truly and radically love each of these three, the lines dividing the three begin to blur. When the loved self becomes fundamentally reoriented in love toward God and neighbor, the self necessarily shifts and de-centers.

This radical shift happened in Paul. His encounter with the risen Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus literally knocked him to the ground and re-engineered his sight.... Paul undoubtedly became de-centred in his moment of conversion, yet something else happened after that initial encounter on the road to Damascus. The totality of the experience of de-centering came in and through subsequent experiences of love. In the years that followed his conversion, Paul's writings attest to a developing relationship with Jesus Christ, an overwhelmingly intimate, loving, and growing relationship.

Chapter 2: Perspective Adjustment, or the Paradox of the Cross

The cross is a profound paradox – a crucified man was a societal reject (Deut 21.3), but a crucified God was a contradiction in terms. The life of Jesus did not fit the expected form of the Messiah.

Once Paul had seized on the paradox of the cross, he realized it held the key to interpretation. It provided the lens through which he and all Christians should examine experience. .. Paul's concern was not so much about survival, or even encouragement, but about providing new Christians with the key to their very being. .. When Paul tells us that victory may come from defeat, gain from loss, and life from death, and gives us examples from his own life, he is urging us that the theology of the paradox of the cross is real, concrete, and urgently important to understand as Christians. He wanted young Christian communities to live out of the hope and joy of the promised of the resurrection, and not to stop in defeat at the first sign of crucifixion.. "If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him" (Rom 6:8). This paradox of the cross is the key to interpreting our life experience as Christians.

Just as Paul spoke to the Philippians, Paul also speaks to us today in our own personal lives and situations. Paul wants us also to perceive the paradoxical pattern of the crucified Lord, repeated in Paul, and in the Philippians, and apply it to our own hearts, minds, thoughts, and actions. Can we take the paradox of the cross as a lens through which to interpret events and people in our own lives? Sometimes when we face a challenge or a loss or a devastating event, it is too hard to allow for the presence of such a paradox. Sometimes we may feel that we will never catch a glimpse of it. But sometimes we are given direct experience of it. When we do experience the paradox of the cross in our own lives, whether in a small event or in a major one, we need to hold onto it as a precious gift. God has given us invaluable experiential insight into the Christian paradox.

Chapter 3: A Map Left Behind – the living pattern of the Christ hymn

There is a clear pattern of descending and ascending in the Philippians 2 hymn.

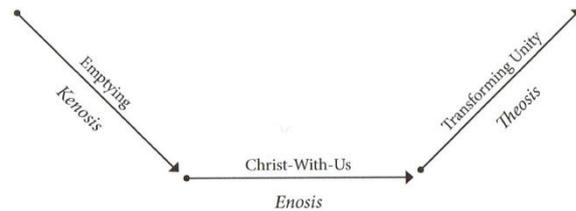
Father" (2:11). One scholar, Bruce Fisk, gives us this visual representation of the "V-shape" of the Christ Hymn:

6 Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 so at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Fisk, "The Odyssey of Christ," 49.

We can detect a clear pattern of descending and ascending not only in the text, but in the person of Jesus Christ.

Each of these moments is expressive of the loving relationship between God and us: self-emptying in the first moment, or *kenosis*; Christ-with-us in the second moment, or *enosis*; and transformative divine unity in the third moment, or *theosis*. So if we could visualize such a pattern in the Christ Hymn, it might look like this:



The chief idea underlying *kenosis* is radical emptying of self as a key characteristic of Jesus Christ, and as such a key characteristic also of his disciples, and one key aspect of their spiritual experience.

Enosis is a term which expresses a moment of Christ-with-us as experienced in creation and community – *Phil 2.7-8, coming in human likeness etc.*

Theosis refers to the transformation of the person as God draws her into union with himself, through which the person is enabled to reflect the likeness or image of God – *Phil 2.9-11.*

The Christian spiritual tradition contains echoes of this three-part way of experiencing God, which ultimately solidified in the concept of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. The idea here is that a person goes through three stages in the spiritual life, experienced in a progressive order...

- The purgative way, a stripping away of things which separate one from God
- The illuminative way, in which a person is granted awareness of the divine in creation
- The unitive way, in which the person experiences union with God

Our three moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis* bear some similarity to this classic schema of the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways, but with several differences. First, our moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis* arise directly from the pattern and life of Jesus Christ as found in the Christ hymn. Second, these three moments describe and are rooted in relationship between humans and God. Each of these moments reveals a way we experience real and present relationship with God in the fabric of our lives. Finally, these three moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis* are free from the lock-step progression often implied by the classic schema (*more like a helix or spiral model*).

Metaphors of blade, file and flame are helpful (from a poem by Jessica Powers)

1. The blade as a metaphor for *kenosis* speaks of pain, loss, and suffering. It confronts us, perhaps corners us, perhaps drives us where we do not want to go, or separates us from ones we love.
2. The file as a metaphor for *enosis* suggests a transformative tool which shapes gradually, at times smoothing our rough textures, and at other times providing us with details of character. The universe of people, places, and things in our individual lives provide steady contact points of *enosis*.
3. The flame as a metaphor for *theosis* evokes a divine flame embracing us to form and fire us into flame ourselves. .. The flame seeks to transform us into its own likeness, flame itself.

In the pattern of Jesus Christ, Paul grasped that as Jesus emptied himself, lived among us, and was exalted by God the Father, so we also live out moments of self-emptying, experience of Christ-with-us in community and creation, and experience of confessing and expressing Jesus Christ in and through our words and actions.

Chapter 4: Mark of the Messiah – the living Christ pattern in Paul

Our children resemble us. In a similar though much more profound way, we humans belong to something much greater and more infinite than ourselves, and when we accept and acknowledge it, we show our belonging to God in our behavior, our choices, our hearts, and sometimes even our physical appearances.

In all of Paul's moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis* occurring in his autobiographical account in Philippians 3:5-15, the one constant and supporting center is divine relationship. Jesus Christ is with Paul in his *kenosis* – Paul is emptied and sustains loss for the very purpose of gaining Christ. .. Paul's *enosis* is overwhelmingly filled with relationship with Jesus Christ, to the point of Paul wishing to share everything with him, even his suffering and crucifixion. Paul's *theosis* is also chiefly characterized by relationship with Jesus Christ Paul experiences intense and participatory union in his conformity to, and possession by, Christ, and strives with all his being for reciprocal possession of Christ.

Chapter 5: Messiah, Expressed – the living Christ pattern in the many

While we undertake the imitation or *mimesis* of Christ, we render it on our own canvas of individuality... Paul.. did not have in mind an identical replication of Jesus Christ which would give rise to a line of rigidly-duplicated sameness among Christians. Rather, just as Paul experienced the expression of Christ in and through his own particular life, circumstances, and being, Paul envisioned a rich and wide-ranging array of expressions of Jesus Christ in and through the many who love him.

St Francis; Mother Teresa

Chapter 6: Target to Arrows – divine transformation

As we move up the staircase, our progressive transformation catalyzes our progressive advancement in spiritual maturity, according to the general "master" movement in our lives from *kenosis*, the emptying and stripping away of all manner of things and attachments which separate us from God; through *enosis*, the experience of the divine in and through all creation and particularly in our experience of communities and nature; and ultimately toward *theosis*, our ever-progressing transformative union with God. These three master movements describe our general progression through the spiritual life, as in the "V-shape" pattern we explored in the Christ Hymn in chapter 3, in Paul's life in chapter 4, and in the lives of St. Francis and Mother Teresa in chapter 5. Simultaneously, as we also examined in each of these chapters, we experience a rich continuum of transformative spiritual experience through all the moments of *kenosis* (moments of darkness, emptying or loss), *enosis* (moments in which we experience the divine in and through creation), and *theosis* (moments in which we experience a oneness or union with God) which play out in our lives, in all the minutes and days and intervals of life—in the infinitesimally small and the vast, in the hidden and the laughably obvious, the simple smile and the complicated drama, in the whisper and the thunderclap. These moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis* occur without sequence, and may be experienced separately, two overlapping together, and sometimes the confluence of all together at once—and all are charged with divine effectiveness. God sequences these moments as he wishes, knowing precisely our interior landscape, and just what effective touches will heal and transform us toward increasingly greater likeness to the Christ pattern and divine union.

In some ways it is far easier for us to accept that God is touching and transforming us through our moments of *enosis*—our experiences of Christ-in-community and through our interactions with individuals which shape us toward the Christ pattern—and through our moments of *theosis*—those experiences in prayer or in any situation in which we experience union with the divine. The challenge for us is to trust in the transformative effectiveness of the divine even when it is completely and radically hidden from us in any of these three moments, but particularly in our moments of *kenosis*, and even more particularly when our *kenosis* involves the very real and horrific pain of devastating circumstances.

Now, you may be thinking that this concept of transformative effectiveness in our darkest place of suffering, in *kenosis*, is really out there. Pain is pain is pain, and it can be a nightmare, and it can seem to last forever, and it can have us gripped in a relentless and merciless grasp. It can issue from wounds which are so wide and deep and cruel that it seems they could never be healed in a lifetime. Pain can hold us in a headlock against a cold brick wall, and push us to anguished limits. Pain is very real, and very miserable, and sometimes that excruciating grip is beyond words.

Yet, can we hold another reality also in our other hand, so to speak? Can we hold the pain in one hand, and in the other the reality that God is with us even in that darkest place of *kenosis*? Our God is the God of the darkness of the crucifixion as well as the light-drenched resurrection. God enters into that dark place with us, and is with us even when we cannot perceive any trace of the divine. God is profoundly with us in our dark place, and God being with us also means God is in us and touching us with healing and transforming touches, even if we cannot perceive God with us, or God's action within us. In fact, part of our *kenosis* may be precisely the challenge of perceiving God as absent from us.

Before you dismiss the concept of positive transformation coexisting with suffering, let me provide a little contemporary scientific support. Over the last twenty-five years there has been an increase in the study of a phenomenon known as posttraumatic growth, or positive psychological change resulting from the onset of highly challenging life circumstances or trauma, including serious and life-threatening illness or injury; physical, mental, or emotional abuse; war; and death of loved

ones.' The evidence overwhelmingly supports that positive change can occur as a person reconstructs the way they view life, themselves, and how they fit into the world. "The psychological struggle with traumatic events can include unambiguously negative psychological effects, but it may paradoxically also include highly meaningful outcomes." In fact, "we have been finding that reports of growth experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events far outnumber reports of psychiatric disorders?" The distress experienced as a result of the trauma is not avoided, ignored or discounted in people who experience posttraumatic growth, but the suffering and positive growth exist simultaneously, and in some cases "posttraumatic growth may require that some distress persist to serve as a continuing impetus to posttraumatic growth." (Tedeschi and Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations*)
The two realities—suffering and growth—necessarily coexist.

This paradoxical coexistence of distress and growth in some people can give rise to transformation:

Posttraumatic growth describes the experience of individuals whose development, at least in some areas, has surpassed what was present before the struggle with crises occurred. The individual has not only survived, but has experienced changes that are viewed as important, and that go beyond what was the previous status quo. Posttraumatic growth is not simply a return to baseline—it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound. . . . posttraumatic growth refers to a change in people that goes beyond an ability to resist and not be damaged by highly stressful circumstances; it involves a movement beyond pretrauma levels of adaption. Posttraumatic growth, then, has a quality of transformation, or a qualitative change in functioning, unlike the apparently similar concepts of resilience, sense of coherence, optimism, and hardiness.'

The positive transformation has been found to relate generally to "change in relationships with others, change in the sense of self, and change in philosophy of life" as observed in five domains:

1. a more profound appreciation of life and a transformed sense of priorities
2. warmer and more intimate relationships
3. an increased sense of personal strength
4. recognition of new possibilities or pathways in one's life
5. spiritual development.

Spirituality has been shown to highly correlate with a person's experience of posttraumatic growth.

Do some of the themes underlying these findings remind you of Paul's expression of the paradox of the cross? Two realities coexist, one painful and one of transformative growth. Paradox predominately characterizes the experience: gain comes from loss. ..

When we are in the crucible, it is very hard to experience anything except for the pain. Yet, if we can direct ourselves.. to something beyond that reality of pain, we may encounter the second reality of the presence of God with us in our dark place... Perhaps.. that reality is experienced simply in the fact that only God can be with us in the full measure of our suffering and pain.

Chapter 7: Fitted to the Bow – Paul's joy

Bonhoeffer:

A sort of joy exists that knows nothing at all of the heart's pain, anguish, and dread; [such anguish] does not last; it can only numb a person for the moment. The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it. What matters is this joy that has overcome.

Closely associated with joy in God's saving action is joy in victory, especially an unlikely or seemingly impossible victory brought about by the Lord. Paul experiences joy in God in

1. relationship with the divine, and in and through Christ as present in and through other Christians
2. in the new and profound experience of God's *effectiveness* and victory even through the cross, and therefore through the most extreme, painful, hidden, humiliating, and deathly of circumstances
3. in a new understanding of God's completion and *fulfillment* of his people in and through the Christ event, which was also a fulfillment of prophecy found in scripture.

Paul does not ignore or minimize the reality of pain, loss, and suffering which the world may present to the followers of Jesus, himself included. .. Paul stands in the gap between the earthly reality of the relentless and often cruel crush of the world, and the heavenly reality of God and the kingdom of God. Although Paul experiences the trial of the discrepancy between these two very real and often paradoxical experiences, he also experiences the joy of bringing his perception and grasp of the heavenly into his experience of the earthly. It is as if Paul, with a foot in both worlds, stands simultaneously in both trial and joy, because he stands in overcoming through Christ Jesus. .. What will separate us from the love of Christ, *etc*, Rom 8.

We may detect the themes of joy in relationship, joy in divine effectiveness, and joy in fulfillment through Jesus Christ intersecting with each mention of joy and rejoicing in the letter.

1. Relationship with the triune God, particularly as revealed in and through the presence of Christ, serves as the wellspring of joy for Paul

We catch glimpses of joy in relationship with the Lord in the lives of many holy people throughout hundreds of years, and often their joy reflects the same qualities seen in Paul's joy. As an example, the Carmelite lay brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (1614-1691) took deep joy in the presence of God. Brother Lawrence credited his conversion to a sudden awareness of God's love for a winter tree. Seeing the tree bare and seemingly dead in mid-winter, Brother Lawrence was filled with a profound understanding of God's love and faithfulness to all his creation, for he knew that the tree would regain leaves and bear fruit.' This insight revealing God's loving presence with us at all times laid a bedrock foundation for Brother Lawrence, who made his life about constant relationship with God. He developed a simple method of aiming his heart and mind solely at constant loving awareness of the presence of God, and he experienced profound joy in the divine presence:

I keep myself in his presence by simple attentiveness and a general loving awareness of God that I call 'actual presence of God' or better, a quiet and secret conversation of the soul with God that is lasting. This sometimes results in interior, and often exterior, contentment and joys so great that I have to perform childish acts, appearing more like folly than devotion, to control them and keep them from showing outwardly.

2. Divine effectiveness, or God's supreme and infinite ability to accomplish his divine purposes despite or even through dark, humiliating, humble, painful or deathly circumstances.

What to our eyes and understanding is death, is paradoxically life. All things work for good...

Stephen Colbert, who lost his father and two of his brothers in a plane crash when he was 10, said

"Boy, did I have a bomb when I was 10. That was quite an explosion. And I learned to love it. So that's why. Maybe, I don't know. That might be why you don't see me as someone angry and working out my demons onstage. It's that I love the thing that I most wish had not happened ."26 Asked by his flabbergasted interviewer to help him understand this better, Colbert immediately cited a letter written by J.R.R. Tolkien in response to a priest who had written questioning him regarding the treatment of death in his novels not as punishment for original sin but as a gift.

"Tolkien says, in a letter back, 'What punishments of God are not gifts?' Colbert knocked his knuckles on the table. "What punishments of God are not gifts?" he said again. His eyes were filled with tears. "So it would be ungrateful not to take everything with gratitude. It doesn't mean you want it. I can hold both of these ideas in my head.

Colbert was thirty-five years old before he could "really feel the truth" of this paradox. Somehow he came to feel grateful for the gift even as he still felt the awfulness of the loss. Perhaps it is this very paradox of gain even in loss which gave rise to the attitude of gratitude and joy in his daily life. His interviewer, obviously deeply impacted by Colbert's words, wrote: "The next thing he said I wrote on a slip of paper in his office and have carried it with me since. It's our choice, whether to hate something in our lives, or to love every moment of them, even the parts that bring us pain.

3. Paul's sense of fulfillment of purpose in and through Jesus Christ, on individual and collective levels of humanity.

He associates his very existence with his mission and purpose of proclamation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1.15-16).

Paul's rich expression of the paradox of Christian life was not academic; he lived it out on a daily basis. "We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful; as unrecognized and yet acknowledged; as dying and behold we live; as chastised and yet not put to death; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet enriching many; as having nothing and yet possessing all things" (2 Cor 6:8-10). Paul's perception of two competing and paradoxical realities, one stemming from an earthly perspective and the other flowing from a heavenly perspective, extended to his experience of two realities regarding his fulfillment in Jesus Christ. On the one hand, Paul fights the fight of his life—he presses on despite all obstacles toward his purpose and fulfillment in and through Jesus Christ. But on the other hand, Paul is already profoundly experiencing a sense of unfolding fulfillment of purpose in and through Jesus Christ, of himself, of his communities, and of humanity. He is in the transformative and fulfilling embrace of Jesus Christ even as he still struggles to endure the fight and the race to arrive at his ultimate fulfillment and goal, the prize of God's upward calling in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion: I live, No Longer I

As the great magnet of Christ swoops down and catches hold of us, we are filled with his magnetizing power, which reorients and empowers us, and enables us to confess and express him through our very being. We slowly discover that each and every moment of our lives is charged with relationship with God – the divine is profoundly with us, in the darkness of *kenosis*, in the community of *enosis*, and in the union of *theosis*. These moments transform us, and may even transform others through us. when we can connect these moments together, we break the darkness of *kenosis*. We are not alone, but part of a vibrant community... we are not alone, but loved by God who is always present and drawing us into an ever-deepening transformative union with him, a *theosis* even in our experience of *kenosis*. It is in walking through the vivid, ever-changing colors of your staircase of spiritual experience that you both live and find that you are no longer you, but Christ in you.