

**Who Am I?**

By

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Smashwords Edition

## CHAPTER ONE: WHO AM I?

Who am I?

How many of you have asked yourself this question?

Who am I?

Somebody gave you a name. Maybe you are old enough to have picked out a name for yourself and changed your “given” name to something you like better.

But I’m not referring to your name. I am referring to your being, your personhood, your essence.

Who am I?

What kind of person am I?

Am I a good person? Am I an evil person? Am I just an ordinary person and nothing special?

Is my life worth living? Do I add anything to the universe? Would it matter if I lived or died?

These are some of the questions we ask ourselves so many times as we are growing up and even later.

Other questions are similar: Why am I here? Does my life have any purpose? Does life mean anything at all? What am I supposed to do with my life?

Oh, God, give me some answers.

In a biblical context, we could ask those around us, as Jesus did.

Who does the world say that I am?

They say you are Mary Jones. You live on Maple Street. You are married and have three children. And you are an attorney working for the County Court.

Or they may say, you are John Smith. You live in a high rise on Lake Shore Drive. You are divorced and living the single life. And you work for the Commodity Exchange.

And that is the appearance of things. That is who we seem to be. But that is not God’s truth.

In God’s truth, we are the Christ, the child of the living God. And we have a ministry to fulfill in this life.

Now why would I say that?

Because you are special.

You are unique.

You are one of a kind.

You are, yourself, the greatest wonder in the universe.

Oh, yes, we look at the stars at night and wonder what they are. We’ve made up stories about them for a million years. And now we know that most of those stories aren’t true. We know that stars are balls of nuclear fuel burning in the night. And our own sun is just an ordinary star.

Who are we compared to a star?

Well we are alive.

A star has no feelings, no thoughts, no self-awareness (that we know about).

We can be awed by the natural forces that create and destroy stars and solar systems and planets. The stars and solar systems and planets aren't awed by these forces. They are just affected by them.

The stars cannot feel awe. The stars do not create myths to explain their existence or the purpose and value of human life. It is people who do that.

You are, yourself, the greatest wonder in the universe.

There may be six billion people alive on this planet. But there are more stars in our galaxy than there are people in our world. And there may be more galaxies in the universe than people on earth.

But you are, still, the greatest wonder in the universe, because you are alive.

Yet, you may wonder, what about the six billion other people in the world?

How can I be the greatest wonder in the universe when there are six billion other people in the world?

Well, because you are unique.

There is no one else like you in the world or the universe.

You are the only person who will ever feel the way you do and look the way you do and make decisions the way you do.

Other people are similar creatures, but no one in the universe is exactly like you. That is the beauty and the loneliness of being one of a kind.

Even if you have children or a twin, no one else in all the world will ever feel exactly the way you feel, see things in exactly the same way, and be exactly the same person you are.

Even if science could clone you, your clone would not be the same person you are. The clone would be raised in a different environment and have different experiences. Your DNA may be identical with your clone but you would not be the same person as your clone.

Yes! You are the greatest wonder in the universe and you should respect yourself and all other people accordingly.

When you die, the universe will lose the uniqueness that is you. There will never ever be another person just like you.

You are special. But so is every person around you. Each of us is unique and each of us should be honored and revered for that reason. Because other people are just as unique as you are.

Life is precious.

You are precious.

Other people are precious.

That is one of the truths God gives us.

Reading Genesis, chapter 1, verses 1-3:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

The Hebrew word for Spirit is also the word for Wind or Breath.

“The Wind of God was moving over the face of the deep.”

“The Breath of God was moving over the face of the deep.”

“Ru-ach” is a powerful word. It means so much in Hebrew. There is no way to translate it with just one English word.

The Ru-ach of God was moving over the face of the deep. And God spoke.

The writer of Genesis could imagine that the Breath of God was used to form the words God spoke: “Let there be light.”

And the Words formed with the Breath of God were so powerful that light was created out of nothing.

So, John, when he wrote his Gospel, is imagining the same thing.

In the beginning, when God spoke, God created the world using the Ru-ach of God, the Breath of God. The Word of God can only be formed with the Breath of God. And the Breath of God was God.

So John writes, in Chapter 1, verses 1-4:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God; all things were made through the Word, and without the Word was not anything made that was made.”

The Breath of God, the Word of God, was moving over the face of the deep. And God spoke, “Let there be light,” and there was light. The Word of God created light. The Power of the Breath of God is in the Word of God. So God, the Word of God, and the Breath of God, are all one and the same, like the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now we move to Genesis chapter 2, verse 7.

“Then the LORD God formed human beings of dust from the ground, and breathed into their nostrils the Breath of Life; and human beings became living souls.”

Here again, the Ru-ach of God is used. But a Word is not spoken here. God formed us of dust from the ground, and then God Breathed into our nostrils the Breath of Life, the Ru-ach of God. And we became living souls with the power to do good or evil.

We are alive because the Ru-ach of God is in us. But God does not control us like puppets. We can choose to do evil or good.

God is always with us. We are never alone. God is always calling to us in our souls, with every breath we take; God reminds us that without the Ru-ach of God, the Breath of God, we are dead.

God loves us and calls us constantly, to do God’s Work. But we can tune God out. We can be so caught up in the cultures and civilizations we have created that we stop listening to God.

Just like many of us, Isaiah did not hear God call to him until he was an adult. But when Isaiah finally stopped his busy life long enough to listen, Isaiah heard God calling to him.

Reading from Isaiah chapter 6, verse 8:

“And I heard the voice of the LORD saying ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ “

And without hesitation, Isaiah answered, “Here I am! Send me.” And thus began Isaiah’s long service to the LORD.

Long after Isaiah answered God’s call to him, Isaiah came to understand that God had been calling him from the beginning of his life. Isaiah just didn’t understand this until he was an adult.

God calls all of us to do God’s work. And only you can do the work God set aside for you to do, from the beginning of your creation.

I will explain all of this as we go along. There is a very simple explanation once you believe in yourself and believe in the power that God gave you to choose what to do with your life.

In 1961, while I was a sophomore in high school, I had encephalitis. I had such a high temperature that I was hospitalized for a month. After another month of recovering at home, and doing homework every day, I was expected to go back to church before going back to school the next day.

My parents had been Missionaries for the Evangelical United Brethren Church in the Philippines from 1950 to 1954. After one year of going around the United States and telling people about their missionary work, my father began to serve E. U. B. Churches again in June 1955. So my first Sunday back to church after my illness, my father was preaching. The text for his sermon was Isaiah 49: verses 1-6.

My father was preaching about the Mission of the Church as a whole to be the Light of the World and not just a candle in the corner of a room, like a church that only does good deeds close to home.

While he preached, I read the text many times. And I came away from my reading with an insight that I would like to share with you.

Reading Isaiah 49:1, 3, 5-6:

“Listen to me, O coastlands, and hearken, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.”

“And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’

“And now the LORD says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength -

“He says, ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant (just) to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’ ”

Read this way, it’s pretty much the standard “Call to Serve” that a prophet gets from God.

It was at this time in his life that Isaiah realized that God had been calling him all along. Not just that time in the temple when he heard God say, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” But God had actually been calling Isaiah while Isaiah was still in

the womb, in the body of his mother. From the beginning of Isaiah's creation, God had set aside work for Isaiah to do and then called Isaiah to do it, all of Isaiah's life.

Now let me read from Isaiah 49 the way my insight led me to understand it.

Isaiah 49, verse 1b: "The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother God named my name."

The LORD calls to each of us from the womb, from the body of our mother, God calls us. God knows us before we are born. God knows us before we are named by our parents. And God calls us to be Servants of God.

Isaiah 49, verse 3: "And God said to me: "You are my Servant, Israel, in whom I will be Glorified."

Let's change one word: "And God said to me: "You are my Servant, (Paul), or You are my servant, (John), or You are my servant, (Bryon), or You are my servant, (Barbara), . . . in whom I will be Glorified."

As you read it again, everyone, put your own name in there. This passage is for you. God is calling you!

Isaiah 49, verse 3: "And God said to me: "You are my Servant, (            ), in whom I will be glorified."

That's it! That's the Insight! God calls EVERYONE! God doesn't just call preachers and prophets and missionaries. God calls everyone, because everyone can serve God in their own daily walk. Everyone!

And there is more. When God calls you by name, your name is a word that God spoke. Just as Isaiah writes in chapter 49, "The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother, God named my name. - And God said to me, 'You are my servant in whom I will be glorified.' "

When God breathes into your nostrils the Breath of Life and you become a living soul, you are filled with the Breath of God, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit.

Not only is God a part of your life from the beginning, but then, God calls you from the womb, from the body of your mother, God names your name. Your name is a WORD. When God Calls you from the womb, and names your name, you become a Living Word of God.

Every one of us is a Living Word of God, because God calls each one of us by name. Before we are born, while we are yet in the womb, God knows us personally. The problem is that not all of us have developed our personal relationship with God during our lifetime.

Being a Living Word of God is part of a natural process. It is just the way God created us.

God Breathes into us the Breath of Life and we become Living Souls.

The Breath of God is the Seed planted in our bodies made of dust or clay or flesh. And the Breath of God is intended to Grow in us and bear fruit through the choices we make in our daily lives. And the fruit of our daily lives is intended to be doing the Work of God.

God calls us from the womb and names our names and we become Living Words of God, Seeds full of potential.

And then God tells us that we are God's Servants and God will be glorified through us.

When God says, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?"

As Living Words of God we are supposed to say, "Here I am, send me."

This process of creating us to do the Work of God is as natural as the natural world; as natural as the seasons of our year; as natural as the seasons of our lives.

In Isaiah chapter 55, verses 10-11: "Says the LORD,

'For, as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
And return not thither but water the earth,  
Making it bring forth and sprout,  
Giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
So shall my (WORD) be  
That goes forth from my mouth;  
It shall not return to me (EMPTY),  
But it shall accomplish that, which I purpose,  
And prosper in the thing for which I sent it.' "

God breathed into us the Breath of Life and WE became living souls. Then God called us from the womb, from the bodies of our mothers God called our names, and said, "You are my servant in whom I will be glorified."

Each of us is a Living Word of God that has come from the mouth of God. And God hopes that we will not return to God, EMPTY. But that we will accomplish what God has planned for us to do.

Isn't it wonderful?

Isn't God's plan for us beautiful?

We have a purpose.

We are called to be servants of God.

And if we do what God asks of us, we will glorify God in the process.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE WORK OF GOD

Now, what is it that God wants us to do?

Have you ever read the Pentateuch? The first five books of the Bible? There are so many interesting stories in it. The ten commandments are in it, but so are thousands of rules and regulations that do not make sense anymore. At one time some of the rules may have been to keep people from getting sick. Some of the laws are sexist and inhumane. There are rules about clean and unclean and how to become clean again. There are rules that require anyone who curses with the name of God to be put to death by stoning. There are rules about putting to death any woman who is not a virgin in certain circumstances.

There are rules about who can enter the tabernacle and who can be a priest. A bald man may not enter. A man who has lost a finger or any other part of his body may not enter.

There are a lot of rules about sacrifices to God. The blood of animals sacrificed is not to be eaten. The blood is the life of the animal and should be poured on the altar. The flesh is to be burned in some instances and in others the priest may eat the meat because it is the pay the priest gets for being a priest.

The Levites could not own the land, but the Levites got the tithe as their pay.

There were so many rules and regulations that you had to have a bureaucracy to keep track of them and tell you how to follow them.

Now what is it that God wants us to do? In a nutshell, all the law and the prophets are wrapped up in the two great commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-40.)

The prophet Micah has another way of putting it: (Micah 6:8)

“ ‘With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ ”

“He has showed you, O man, what is good: and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and loving kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

This is the way Jesus lived his life. We are called to do the same.

Everything I have been talking about is natural. It is the way God’s creation works.

God breathes into everyone the breath of life. Everyone is a living soul because God gave us life. And God is a part of everyone, because the Breath of God is in us.

But that doesn’t mean that the Will of God shall be done by every soul who has life. Many of us choose evil over good.

Many of us choose, not to seek justice, or, not do loving kindness. And most of us do not choose to walk humbly with God.

There are too many people out there who tell you that they have all the answers. You are not ready for democracy, they say. You can’t be trusted to rule yourselves.

Some people say, Listen to me I have all the Bible answers you need. Follow me. Do what I say. Send money.

And in our country, where we have freedom of speech, people and companies and organizations with lots of money can advertise falsehood as truth. And the American public will believe it and vote for it, because sound bites are more powerful than that still small voice of God in our souls.

God is within you. You do not need me to tell you what to do. Listen to that still small voice, but remember, you can be so selfish and cruel, and not realize it. So that still



small voice might not be God. For God will never ask you to kill. God will never ask for your first born for the sin of your soul.

As Micah said, “What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and loving kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

This is what Jesus did. It got him into a lot of trouble. It got him killed. But Jesus understood the risks.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, “Father, if it be possible, take this cup away from me. But not my will, but thy will be done.”

Jesus said, I will do what you ask of me. I am your servant in whom you will be glorified.

Jesus followed Isaiah’s path. “Here I am. Send me.” Jesus said.

And at the end of our days, we shall all return to God, and, hopefully, we will have accomplished ALL that God sent us to do. For woe unto us if we return to God, Empty.

And what does the Lord require of us?

To love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

To do justice, to do loving kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

Long ago, when I was at Camp Miami, a summer church camp near Germantown, Ohio, a young African woman from Sierra Leone, West Africa, came to lead us in evening vespers. She told a wonderful story. I don’t know if it is true, but it has such a beautiful image I want to share it with you today.

She said, “In my village in Africa, we had a church. It was the only church in the area so people came from all around to worship.

“One day a boy about six years old was walking by and heard us singing. He came in to see what was going on. The church was full so he stood in the back watching and listening.

“When it came time for the offering, he had nothing to give. It troubled him greatly. He watched as the offering plates were taken down the aisle and placed on the altar at the front of the church.

“Finally, while everyone was singing the closing hymn, that little boy walked down the center aisle, took an offering plate off of the altar, placed it on the ground, and stepped into it.”

She said, “ A pastor told this story on his first Sunday at that church. He said, ‘I was that little boy. Now, here I am to serve the Lord.’ “

Pretend it's a new year and time for New Year's Resolutions. Make one. Respond to God's Call to Serve. There is a world in need of our example, as Christ is our example.

And what does the LORD require of us:

TO DO JUSTICE,

TO DO LOVING KINDNESS,

TO WALK HUMBLY WITH OUR GOD.

Wherever we go! Whatever we do! We are to be Servants of God. If we choose to be missionaries, or preachers, or teachers, or bricklayers, or tent makers, or anything else at all, we are Called to Be God's Servants as we do it.

We are to do justice! Seek justice! Advocate for justice! Vote for justice! Lobby for justice! March in the streets for justice!

We are to do Loving-kindness, not because we are loved back; Not because someone Gave something to us first, and we owe them; We are to do it because Walking with God means to do loving kindness as we live and breathe!

It means to do justice no matter what the cost! It means being willing to serve God even to the Death, Death on a Cross. And that is exactly what Jesus did for us!

We are Called to serve God, with every move we make, with every breath we take. We are called to Serve God with our whole being: to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Reading again from Isaiah 49: “. . . God called you from the womb, from body of your mother God called your name. And God said, ‘You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified.’

“And now, the LORD says, who formed you from the womb to be God's servant, God says, ‘It is too small a thing for you to just love those who love you, to just light up your own little corner of the world, I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’ ” That God's Kingdom may come on Earth as it is in heaven. Just as it says in the Lord's Prayer. Amen.

Isaiah 49, verse 6: “God says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant (just) to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel;”

To paraphrase, “God says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant just to love those who love you.

“just to love those you meet at church, or choir practice, or school, or places where you feel comfortable.”

Instead, God says, in the second part of the verse, “I will give you as a Light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Loving those who hate us.

Loving those who have hurt our feelings

Loving those who make us angry.

Loving those who are unlovable.

God calls us to serve. From the beginning, from the womb, God calls our names!

God knows us! Before we know anything or anybody. God knows us, because God breathed into us the breath of life. We are living souls because God breathed into us the Breath of God. We belong to God, long before we are born and lose our way.

God is calling each of us right now, and God has been doing so from the very beginning of time.

Some of you may have a problem with the idea that the Breath of God and the Spirit of God (or the Holy Spirit) is one and the same thing.

Remember in John 20: 19-22, it is the first day of the week, Monday after Easter Sunday. John writes that the disciples were hiding in fear for their lives behind locked doors. And Jesus suddenly appears among them. And he says, “Peace be with you. Then he shows them his hands and his side. Again Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” and Jesus adds, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when he said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

I personally think that the disciples needed to believe in themselves just as we need to believe in ourselves. They were already full of the Holy Spirit because they were alive as a result of the Breath of God giving them life. But they were so scared of dying they hid in a room with locked doors. Jesus Breathes on them the same way God already Breathed into them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” And suddenly, the disciples are empowered. Now without fear, they can spread the good news that Jesus is alive and well and living in us, and waiting for us to do the work of God.

With this witness from the Gospel of John, it makes you wonder why the writer of Luke-Acts had to tell the story of Pentecost. If Jesus had already Breathed the Holy Spirit onto the disciples, why did God need to do it again at Pentecost?

I believe it is because human beings do not believe in the power and presence of God in human life. Even though God breathed into us the Breath of Life, we don't believe it. The Ru-ah of God is so commonplace that we do not revere it. If we believed

it we would pay more attention to our health and we would hold in higher esteem the people around us and even the people we do not know.

It is easier for us to believe that people we do not know or people we fear are not as worthy of life and love as we are. Even though all logic would tell us that if one human life is valuable, then all human life is valuable everywhere in the universe, and we should act accordingly.

In Acts 2:1-4: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Again, I believe that the disciples were already full of the Holy Spirit, because they were alive and full of the Breath of God that gave them life. But they needed this Pentecost experience to feel empowered to do the work of God. They needed a boost. They needed the coach to get them together and pump them up for the game. So, full of fire after this experience, the disciples go out and preach the Gospel and do the work of God.

Paul, the Apostle, also writes about the presence of God in human life many times, but my favorite quote from Paul is in I Corinthians 6:19-20: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

### CHAPTER THREE:

Let's pause here for a little activity.

When you woke up this morning and took your first conscious breath, how did it feel? Wonderful? Did it hurt a little? Were you stopped up, feeling stuffy? Have you got some allergies? Maybe you have a cold coming on, perhaps a touch of flu? Or did it just feel good to breathe and be alive?

If you took a shower, the air in the shower is usually heavy with water vapor. It feels good for a while but it is also harder to breath because it is heavier.

Then you step out of the shower and take that first breath of lighter air. That usually feels pretty good.

What about getting into your coat and stepping outside and that cold air hits your face and you inhale.

On a spring morning that can feel Wonderful, but in the winter, the chill can hit you deep in the chest and make you cough.

In the summer, we have the problem of stepping out of air conditioning and into the heat of the day. Now isn't that a change in the way the air affects our breathing?

If we simply remember that God is the Breath of Life that makes us living souls, then we can appreciate even more our experience of Breathing every moment of every day of our lives.

Do any of you remember watching Sesame Street when they used to have that short skit?

“Breathe in! Breathe out! Breathe in! Breathe out!

Breathe in! Breathe out! Breathe in! Breathe out!

You're ALIVE!”

That's how we are supposed to feel: Alive!

Now let's all stop for a moment and Breathe in slowly the way the Doctor tells you to breathe, when he's listening to you breathe with his stethoscope.

Ever have a yogi class and you are supposed to breathe together as a group. Let's see if we can Breathe in and out together.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

When a large group of people do this together, it is a form of Communion: Being aware of our Aliveness, in Christ, at the same time, and Celebrating it.

In ancient Israel, people would say, when some one died,

“The Breath is not in him.”

In Luke, chapter 23, verse 46, it says: “Then Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into they hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this, he breathed his last.”

The breath was not in him.

Now, remember, the Hebrew language has the same word for Breath and for Spirit; the same word for Wind and Spirit: Ru-ach! That Hebrew word sounds like wind, doesn't it. Ru-ach!

As with our Native Americans, God was the Great Spirit, to ancient Hebrews; God was the Great Breath, the source of all LIFE, the source of all BREATH.

About thirty years ago, Sting wrote a song the Police sang together. He wrote it during a bitter divorce. And he never understood why people liked it so much, because it was a song about obsession, possession, and control. He wrote it when he was angry and jealous.

“Every move you make! Every Breath you take!

I'll be watching you.”

But that is just the kind of relationship God had with Israel in most of the Old Testament. God was a jealous God. God was a possessive God. “Thou shalt not have any gods before me.”

Remember that?

Ancient Hebrews believed that God, the giver of Breath, could take that Breath away in an instant. So God was a God to be feared and obeyed.

This is not the God of Isaiah. This is not the God of Micah. This is not the God of Jesus. This is not the God of Christians.

The God of Isaiah lovingly breathes into our nostrils the breath of life. The God of Isaiah lovingly calls us from the womb, from the bodies of our mothers God names our names.

And God says, “You are my servant, in whom I will be glorified.”

And we haven't done anything yet. We haven't even been born.

Why does God do this?

Because God is with us from the very beginning, calling to us.

Because God believes in us and has plans for us to do God's work.

God gives us life, and then God calls us and hopes for the best.

And as God waits for our answer, God watches every move we make, every breath we take, from inside us.

You see, God cannot force us to serve God. We have been given the freedom to choose between good and evil all of our days.

All God can do is pour himself into our human forms and call out to us, asking us, “Whom Shall I send? Who will go for us?” And we have the choice. We can say, “Hear I am, send me.”

Or, we can turn away,

turn a deaf ear,

pretend we don't understand,

and do, only what pleases us,

or, do what pleases someone else, who isn't God.

Like our friends, or our family, or the IN CROWD,

Or, do what is popular, but not what is right in the eyes of God.

I was born on December 4, 1944. When I was a child, I'm not sure I thought very much about death. Most of my experiences were sensual and tactile and emotional.

I knew pain and rejection. I knew love and adulation. But being an abused child, rejected by one parent and smothered with affection by another to make up for the rejection of the other, doesn't necessarily mean that I knew about death and what death meant to people.

My parents were missionaries in the Republic of the Philippines on the island of Luzon. My sister and I went to public school with Filipino children.

Since there were so many different languages in the Philippines, English was the official language for the public schools. But I didn't learn how to read until I was eight anyway.

I'm not sure how I got out of the second grade. But I think it was because I was the only white boy in the whole school and nobody wanted to tell my parents that I couldn't read, so the teacher passed me.

That summer the nurse who lived downstairs was babysitting for my parents. We were all sitting down for lunch and the nurse asked me to go into the kitchen and get the box of crackers.

I went into the kitchen and looked around. I couldn't find them. I went back out and told the nurse I couldn't find them and she grabbed me by an ear and dragged me back into the kitchen and put my nose up against a box on the counter and spelled, as she pointed to the letters, "C .. R .. A .. C .. K .. E .. R .. S. Can't you read!"

That was the first time I knew there was any point in knowing how to read. Not to save my ear from hurting, but to find something in a box. By the end of the summer I was reading Jack and Jill, newspapers and comic books from the states. I was even writing my own Winnie the Pooh stories.

When I went to the third grade in public school, I was frustrated by how much the other children were struggling to read. They were so slow. I told my mother about it. And she suggested that I try to read the book upside down so I wouldn't get bored. I did that. I even sight read when it was my turn to read, holding the book upside down. I might be able to do that today, if my bifocals or reading glasses will let me.

The point of this little story is that I was reading at a twelve-year old level by the end of that summer. The third grade reader had a lot of stories in it. I read them all within a month.

I remember two stories in particular. One story was about a boy who found a beautiful butterfly. He caught it and ran a pin through its body and pinned it to the wall of his hut so he could look at its beautiful wings every day.

That night, the boy dreamed that the insects came and pinned him to his bed with a giant pin. They asked him how he liked it. He thought he died.

When he woke up the next morning, he was glad to be alive and he never killed a butterfly again as long as he lived. He enjoyed them as they lived and flew from flower to flower.

That was the first time I ever thought about life and death. I stopped stepping on ants and I started taking earthworms out of mud puddles and putting them on dry land so they could burrow under the earth again. And I never left fireflies or any other insect in a jar to die. I caught them and looked at them for a while, but I always released them and watched them fly away.

The second story I remember so well was a story about a man who went to sleep and woke up scared. There was a stranger outside his door and he was afraid.

The man went out his back door and ran away. He ran for hours, keeping just a few minutes ahead of the stranger who pursued him.

Later the man came back to his house and saw that there was a funeral procession. And he stopped running and wondered who in his family had died. He was greatly concerned. He was afraid that his wife or one of his children had died.

As the mourners carried the funeral pallet with the deceased lying upon it, the man recognized himself. The stranger came up to him and stood quietly beside him.

The man was no longer afraid, for he knew who the stranger was who pursued him. The stranger said, "Come. It is time for you to go. No one can escape me."

The man in the book had died of old age. I was young. Death didn't apply to me.

A few weeks after I read these stories, I came to school and our teacher informed us that one of our classmates had died. She lined us up and we marched single file, following her out of the school and down the road to the village and off the road to a hut below town.

Then four of us at a time climbed the ladder into the hut. There lying on a table was a little boy, my age, dressed in his blue Cub Scout uniform. His hands were folded over his stomach, just below his neckerchief with his brass neckerchief slide.



His hands were held together with candle wax. And his eyes were sealed closed with candle wax. The boy had died of an unnamed illness. It was probably polio, which was very prevalent in the Philippines in 1953.

At the time, I didn't think about my own death. I thought about old people dying and sick people dying and people in a bus falling off a mountain trail and dying on their way to a track meet. But I never thought that anything like that could ever happen to me.

In the whispered conversations with schoolmates, on our way back to school, we didn't think we had anything to worry about unless we got sick. But then one of our classmates reminded everyone of the bahnig. The bahnig was a native spirit that came out at night to steal souls.

The spirit rose from the ground at night and hid in dark places waiting for the unwary to walk by. Then the spirit would reach out and grab you and steal your soul and you would die. In that case, old age or accident or sickness had nothing to do with death.

Except for the wax, our classmate had looked like he was sleeping. Maybe our classmate hadn't been sick at all. Maybe he had been caught by the bahnig who stole his soul.

After that, I never stayed out at night. When the mists would rise from the hot earth at night, it looked like spirits coming to life.

There were a few times when I stayed too long with a friend and the sun would go down before I was safe inside my house where there was some light.

I remember racing across the schoolyard and down across the road dug between the hills. And I jumped across the culvert in the drainage ditch because I figured if I was in midair when I crossed the culvert, the spirit couldn't catch me and steal my soul. But as I sailed across the ditch, the hair on my arms and at the back of my neck stood on end. I was so terrified.

I didn't think of death having any affect on me unless I touched the ground and let the bahnig catch me. But I did wonder about death and old age and sickness and accidents that killed other people. And I thought about how this applied to my grandparents. I wondered if I would ever see them again.

My mother's parents were already dead. But my father's parents lived in a small town in Ohio. And they were going to retire. And they debated on whether to come to the Philippines to visit us or use their money to move to a retirement community.

I remembered our boat ride over the Pacific Ocean. And I thought about a boat going down in a storm and my grandparents falling to the bottom of the sea. I figured that they wouldn't survive that, because the big fish would eat them. And I cried because I wouldn't get to see them again if that happened.

I worried about that until my father informed the family that his parents would not be coming to visit. They were going to use their money to go to the retirement community instead.

I was disappointed, but also very relieved. I didn't worry about them drowning in the Pacific Ocean anymore.

When we returned to the states on a boat, in May 1954, I never thought about death for myself. I wasn't afraid at all. Death didn't have any affect on me. I was too young, too healthy, and too lucky.

We reached Hawaii and it was King Kamehameha Day. I wondered where the king was. I wanted to see him on one of the floats.

They had his image in flowers sitting on a throne on one float and they had a man impersonating him on another float. I was told there was no real king, because the real king was dead. The parade was only in his honor and not something he would ever see.

I thought it was a shame that he would never see a parade in his honor. It was a beautiful parade.

We arrived in San Francisco and made our way by train across the continent. When we arrived in Columbus, Ohio, in May, my grandparents were there to meet us. We went home with them.

My father bought a car. Then my parents left me with my grandparents and took my two sisters and my brother with them while they searched for a place to live. I didn't see them again until Father's Day.

While they were gone, I never thought about them while I was busy playing with my new friends. But every Wednesday night, my grandparents took me to prayer meeting. And every Sunday, they took me to church. And I had a lot of time to think.

I wondered if I would ever see my family again. I wondered if they would have an accident with the car. I wondered how I would know if they got sick or died. I wondered if I would feel them dying, if they were in an accident far away.

I thought it would be nice to have a way to instantly communicate with people all the time, no matter where they were. Then you would always know if they were alive or dead and you wouldn't have to wait for a letter, a telegram, or a telephone call.

By Father's Day morning, I had spent a lot of time thinking about these things in church. And that morning, for some reason, I reversed all my thoughts about my absent family.

I wondered if they knew that I was in church sitting next to my grandmother. My grandfather was taking part in the service. I wondered if they would know if I were sick or dead or if they would have to hear about it from someone.

And for the first time in my life I applied death to myself. And instantly, I knew that death was the end of all sensation and feeling and thinking. All the talk about heaven wasn't logical. When you were dead, you were dead. There was no afterlife. There was nothing after death.

I walked home with my grandparents after church and I hardly spoke to them. I looked at the summer sky and clouds and birds and trees and flowers and realized that if I were dead I would never experience them again.

When we got to their house, my grandfather settled down in the living room to read the paper. My grandmother went into the kitchen to prepare Sunday dinner.

My parents and siblings were expected to arrive for lunch. They had gone to another church to make a report as missionaries.

I went into the parlor and closed the doors. I sat at the player piano and played some music. And I realized that when I was dead, I wouldn't hear music either. I wouldn't be able to hear the wonderful hymns that were so beautiful in church. And I began to cry.

I cried for hours. My grandfather came in to see what was wrong and tried to talk to me. My grandmother came in to try to talk to me. When my parents arrived for dinner, they each came in and tried to talk to me.

I had heard four different views about the afterlife and none of them made any sense to me at all. I couldn't see how God would have a heaven for people but not for other forms of life. It wasn't logical. All life continued after death or none of it.

I cried through dinner and dessert. After the dishes were washed, my mother came in and tried to talk to me again. By then I was exhausted by my grief. We went over the issue one more time.

Since I couldn't believe what any of the adults had told me, she suggested that I try to work the problem out for myself. Yes, it was true that everyone died. There was no doubt about that. But there were a lot of different ways people explained it and came to accept it and live with it.

I said I would think about it. And I have.

Ever since that day, I have tried to make sense of the world, of life, and death. And I have tried to find meaning and purpose for myself and for other people as well.

I think my childhood ended that day and I became a nine and a half year old adolescent. From that day on, I questioned all authority and tried to think for myself.

This book is about the ways I have tried to live with my death. I still do not accept it, but one of these days, I will have no choice.

Sometimes I think that nobody else in the world has ever thought of the things that I think. But then I read a good book and find that other people have thought about similar things. Maybe I am unique in the way I feel and think, but most of us have thought about a lot of the same questions and sometimes, we even come up with the same answers.

As I look at people on the street and in restaurants or in a bus terminal, I wonder if they are busy with their own thoughts, if they have thought about their own mortality, and if it is something that bothers them at all. From the attitude of others, it seems that whatever answer they found for themselves, they go on with life as though nothing has changed.

After I became a pastor, I had to prepare Funeral Sermons and I had to come up with something that made sense to me and to others and especially to the family of the deceased.

The following is based on my third funeral sermon. It was first used in 1971. Often the family of the deceased had special requests of scriptures, poems, or hymns to be a part of the funeral. These requests would change the service to fit their needs:

In Genesis, these words are recorded: "The Lord God formed people of dust from the ground; and the Lord God breathed into their nostrils God's breath of life; and people became living souls, filled with life and power. The power to do good or evil, as they chose." Then later in the next chapter, these additional words are recorded: "From dust thou art and to dust thou shall return." There is no mention of the soul living on after death in the first chapter of Genesis. The only thing that has eternal life is God.

If all we are is dust, where's the value in human life? Maybe we should be turned into fertilizer when we die and not buried or cremated. We would be of some use if we were turned into fertilizer. Otherwise we are only taking up valuable space that should be used for planting crops for the next generation of hungry people.

It makes you wonder if there is any meaning to life. I ask myself that question at least once a day. To answer it positively can be an affirmation of faith for every person in the universe.

We don't ask to be born; and once born, we don't ask to die, unless we are suffering.

Life is a gift from God, a surprise package that we could not have expected and could not have asked for.

But once born, death is another matter. And although death is also a gift of God, to bring to an end the struggle, the pain and suffering, and the sorrow of this life, it also brings to an end the earthly pleasures we enjoy.

And so . . . we are afraid. We wonder, why there should be life - if all it does is end in death? And we easily forget that if there were no death, suffering for some people would never end. Life for many would be everlasting pain and misery.

Though we are afraid of death; though we cannot understand why there would be life - only to be followed by death, God is wiser than we. In God's love for us, God planned death as an eternal rest from our labors, our sorrows, and our suffering.

Death comes to everyone: Some die young; others die old. Some people linger, clinging to life by a thread of pain, or pleasure; others seem to leave us like a brief candle so quickly snuffed out.

We may wish that death might never come, but we cannot determine the length of life, because there are always circumstances beyond our control. What is left for us, and our loved ones, is the quality of our life experience. In this, we do have some choice - not only for ourselves, but for others as well.

Now, how can we enrich the quality of life?

Some people decide that fame and fortune is the only way to a quality life. If that were the case, very few human beings have any meaning to their lives. It is only the rich and the famous who have meaningful lives. No one else does.

But if it weren't for the billions of other people who adulate the rich and famous, the rich and famous wouldn't be rich and famous. There have to be the masses who say: Look at her. I wish I had her life. I wish I were beautiful like her. I wish I were a famous singer. Look at him. I wish I had the power of life and death over other people. That would be meaningful.

But how does having the power of life and death bring a person meaning? It only means that if there is someone else more powerful than you, they have meaning and you don't.

We have to create meaning. We have to say, "I have value and you have value." Human life isn't valuable unless we make it valuable. And making it valuable for only ourselves doesn't make it valuable for other people. We have to value all human life. And it is even better if we value all life. To say that all life is sacred. That includes us. Making all life sacred, gives everyone meaning.

And what is the best way to give ourselves meaning and purpose?

Micah had the answer:

"The Lord has shown you, O Man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and loving kindness and to walk humbly with your god."

We are filled with the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, . . . We have the power to do good; and we have the power to do evil. We get to choose. God does not force us to do good. God asks us to do good. And we can refuse to do good and choose to do evil. We have the power to enrich the quality of life for ourselves and for others.

Luke 10:25-37. Matthew 22:34-40. Mark 12:28-34. Mt 5:43-48.

Jesus says everything in the law and the prophets can be summed up into two great commandments. The first is to love the lord your god with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. And the second commandment is just like it. To love your neighbor as yourself.

How can this be? How can the first commandment: “To love the lord your god with all your heart, strength, soul, and mind.” be exactly like the second commandment: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.”?

Because God is in your neighbor just as God is in you. Remember the Breath of God that gives you life. That breath of God is God. There are six billion people on earth filled with the breath of God.

But the Pharisee wants to come out on top in this exchange of wit, so the Pharisee asks: Who is my neighbor?

And when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan and asked, who was neighbor to the injured man? The Pharisee says, The one who showed compassion. The one who showed love for that injured man.

Jesus says, “Go, thou, and do likewise.” Go love your neighbor.

We know the answer. Every human being on earth or in universe is my neighbor. Every life form filled with the Breath of God is my neighbor. We are neighbor to all the life on earth and all the life in the universe.

All life is sacred. You are sacred. You are the greatest wonder in the universe. You can think. You can solve problems. You have the power to do good or to do evil. Which will you choose?

We have this opportunity before us. We can enrich the quality of life for ourselves, our loved ones, and for all life throughout the universe. All we have to do is respond to this call.

God called you from the womb, from the body of your mother God named your name and said, You are my servant in whom I will be glorified.

Jesus answered God’s call. We can do the same.

We can choose to do good rather than evil. We can say, "Yes!" to the power of God at work within us. We can follow the Way of the Christ and be obedient to the will of God in our daily lives.

With every breath we take, with every move we make, we can bear witness to the power of God in us. And through the witness of our lives, we can lead others to respond to this call as well. In this way, we can share in the high quality of the Life of Christ with our loved ones and with all other people in the universe.

It is the Way of the Christ that brings us lives of meaning and purpose and worth. What do we learn from Christ when we "take the yoke upon us?"

We learn to know the Way of the Christ. And that way is love:

"To love the Lord our God with all our heart, strength, soul, and mind." "To love our neighbors as ourselves." "To care for the widow and the fatherless." "To love the stranger and our enemy."

To love one another, to care for each other, is to live in such a way as to make life meaningful and worthwhile for our selves and for other people. Through our love for each other, we find faith to believe and do God's will. And through our love and our faith, we have the courage to hope when all around us things seem to be hopeless.

The quality of life - and not the length of life - determines whether life has meaning or not. And in the Way of the Christ, we all have the opportunity of finding meaning and purpose. All we have to do is respond to God's Call.

This call is universal. It is not limited to a few - to one or two, here and there. It is open to all people of all nations, of all ages, of all abilities.

And that way is open to all who are alive. All they have to do is respond to God's call, with or without our help.

The quality of life is enriched by sharing our burdens and cares with one another and sharing our joys and sorrows with one another. We can do this. We can see ourselves as part of all life. We can see ourselves as members of the same family, no matter where we live or whom we look like or what we believe. There are so many ways to serve God that we can each find our own way in our own walk of life. But the best way of all is the way of love.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, "I may be able to speak the languages of people and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains - but if I have not love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned [in self sacrifice], but if I have no love, this does me no good.

"Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail.

"Love is eternal. There are inspired messages, but they are temporary; there are gifts of speaking in strange tongues, but they shall cease; there is knowledge, but it will pass. For our gifts of knowledge and of inspired messages are only partial, but when the perfect comes, then what is partial will disappear.



”When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now I am an adult, I have outgrown my childish ways. What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete - as complete as God’s knowledge of me.

Meanwhile, these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love.”

And love shows itself, not through what we say, but through what we do. Love is the way of the Christ. Through loving each other, life becomes beautiful - even amidst pain, suffering, and death. Life is made meaningful and filled with purpose through our loving actions in this world.

We can love other people. We can love all of life. We can love the world by taking care of our eco-system, conserving wildlife, and loving one another, even those whom you hate or who say they hate you.

Love is the way of the Christ. And because we can be loving people, we can respond to the call of the Christ For it is true what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans: “. . . that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Why? Because God is within us. God breathed God’s Breath of Life into us. We are filled with the Holy Spirit from the very beginning. Nothing can ever separate us from God, except our own ideas. And that is an illusion. For no matter what we believe, we cannot change the fact of God’s presence in our lives. We cannot run far enough or fast enough to get away from God. Because God is our very life. That is why Jesus said that to love God was the same as loving our neighbors and loving ourselves, and the other way around.

All our lives God calls us. Sometimes we ignore God. Sometimes we just pretend to go along with God when our hearts aren’t in it. Other times we said, “Yes, Lord. Yes, Lord.” But we don’t do it anyway.

But on that occasion when we are fully present, doing God’s will with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, it feels so good. We feel so good, because in that instant we are God’s LOVE in action. We are the Christ, alive and well, doing the will of God.

God does not call everyone to be preachers, or missionaries in the pure sense. But, God does call each of us to do God’s will in our own life situation. Whatever your job, you can do it God’s way. Whatever the situation, we can do God’s will, or not. We choose.

It isn’t easy. It is hard work to do God’s will. It takes a commitment.

There are so many distractions. And there are ways to be Selfish and concerned only about ourselves and our family or group.

Sometimes people think, “Oh, I can do that.” when God calls them. But what they do is the minimum effort. They do what satisfies themselves or some ritual they have developed.

For example, long ago the ancient Hebrews had a tradition. Once a year they would take a journey to their High Holy Place and make a blood sacrifice. At one time in their history, they sacrificed their first-born child. Later it was only their daughters that they sacrificed. Still later they substituted the “scapegoat” or other animal for the human sacrifice.

For a long time the first-born of every animal was sacrificed to God instead of the first-born child.

Once this annual sacrifice was made, they believed that their duty to God was complete. Their sins were forgiven until the next year when they had to do it all over again.

A once a year, or once a month, or once a week kind of religion is easy. Maybe a once a day kind of religion is easy. Just do it, get it over with, and get on with your life. Do what you want after that.

But God doesn't want that easy occasional sacrifice. God wants us to do God's work every day, every hour; every moment of every hour; every instant of every second.

Every breath you take, every move you make,  
God wants you doing God's work.

What's wonderful about the church is that we are not alone. Together we can be God's servant. Together we can be the Body of Christ at work in the world. Where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ will be there also.

God is always with us. When we gather together we can pool our resources and our knowledge and our strength. We can support and encourage one another.

In the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 12 and 13, John writes about the Word of God, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but born of God.”

John is looking back at our creation. God formed us from dust of the ground and breathed into our nostrils the Breath of Life and we became living souls.

Then God calls us from the womb. God calls our names and says, “You are my servant in whom I will be glorified.”

Now, John says, Yea, not just servants, but children of God, brothers and sisters of the Christ. And this happens not because you were born of flesh and blood, but because you are born of the Spirit of God. And this comes to us by FAITH.

God breathed into you the Breath of God. Then God called you from the womb. God named your name. God sent you as a Living Word of God into the world to do God's work.

And now John says, Not just a Living Word of God, but a Child of God, a brother or sister of the Christ.

Individually we are servants of God, Words of God, children of God. But together, we are the Church, the Body of Christ, at work in the world.

We need to remember who we are, where we come from and where we are going. We are living souls filled with the Breath of God. We are called to be servants glorifying God. We are Living Words of God sent into the world to do what God planned for us to

do. We are Children of God, brothers and sisters of the Christ. And together, we are the Church, the Body of Christ, at work in the world.