

Life

by George MacDonald

God's gift of life is the most essential thing we need, and we should strive to live in and by willing to live.

Scripture: John 5:24, John 10:10, John 14:6, John 15:5, John 17:3, Romans 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:22, Galatians 2:20, 1 John 3:1, 1 John 5:11

Topics: "Abundant Life", "Divine Nature"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the abundant life that Jesus came to give us, emphasizing the need for more life in every aspect of our existence. He delves into the concept of life as the ultimate reality, contrasting it with death as a mere shadow and negation. MacDonald explores the deep connection between God's will and our will, highlighting the importance of obedience as the key to oneness with God and partaking in the divine nature. He challenges listeners to seek a life that is one with the essential Life, filled with the endless outpouring of God's love, and to embrace love as the essence of true existence.

Transcript

'I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly.'--St. John x. 10.

In a word, He came to supply all our lack--from the root outward; for what is it we need but more life? What does the infant need but more life? What does the bosom of his mother give him but life in abundance? What does the old man need, whose limbs are weak and whose pulse is low, but more of the life which seems ebbing from him? Weary with feebleness, he calls upon death, but in reality it is life he wants. It is but the encroaching death in him that desires death. He longs for rest, but death cannot rest; death would be as much an end to rest as to weariness: even weakness cannot rest; it takes strength as well as weariness to rest. How different is the weariness of the strong man after labour unduly prolonged, from the weariness of the sick man who in the morning cries out, 'Would God it were evening!' and in the evening, 'Would God it were morning!' Low-sunk life imagines itself weary of life, but it is death, not life, it is weary of. Never a cry went out after the opposite of life from any soul that knew what life is. Why does the poor, worn, out-worn suicide seek death? Is it not in reality to escape from death?--from the death of homelessness and hunger and cold; the death of failure, disappointment, and distraction; the death of the exhaustion of passion; the death of madness--of a household he cannot rule; the death of crime and fear of discovery? He seeks the darkness because it seems a refuge from the death which possesses him. He is a creature possessed by death; what he calls his life is but a dream full of horrible phantasms.

'More life!' is the unconscious prayer of all creation, groaning and travailing for the redemption of its lord, the son who is not yet a son. Is not the dumb cry to be read in the faces of some of the animals, in the look of some of the flowers, and in many an aspect of what we call Nature?

All things are possible with God, but all things are not easy. It is easy for him to be, for there he has to do with his own perfect will: it is not easy for him to create--that is, after the grand fashion which alone will satisfy his glorious heart and will, the fashion in which he is now creating us. In the very nature of being--that is, God--it must be hard--and divine history shows how hard--to create that which shall be not himself, yet like himself. The problem is, so far to separate from himself that which must yet on him be ever and always and utterly dependent, that it shall have the existence of an individual, and be able to turn and regard him--choose him, and say, 'I will arise and go to my Father,' and so develop in itself the highest Divine of which it is capable--the will for the good against the evil--the will to be one with the life whence it has come, and in which it still is--the will to close the round of its procession in its return, so working the perfection of reunion--to shape in its own life the ring of eternity--to live immediately, consciously, and active--willingly from its source, from its own very life--to restore to the beginning the end that comes of that beginning--to be the thing the maker thought of when he willed, ere he began to work its being.

I imagine the difficulty of doing this thing, of effecting this creation, this separation from himself such that will in the creature shall be possible--I imagine, I say, the difficulty of such creation so great, that for it God must begin inconceivably far back in the infinitesimal regions of beginnings--not to say before anything in the least resembling man, but eternal miles beyond the last farthest-pushed discovery in protoplasm--to set in motion that division from himself which in its grand result should be individuality, consciousness, choice, and conscious choice--choice at last pure, being the choice of the right, the true, the divinely harmonious. Hence the final end of the separation is not individuality; that is but a means to it; the final end is oneness--an impossibility without it. For there can be no unity, no delight of love, no harmony, no good in being, where there is but one. Two at least are needed for oneness; and the greater the number of individuals, the greater, the lovelier, the richer, the diviner is the possible unity.

God is life, and the will-source of life. In the outflowing of that life, I know him; and when I am told that he is love, I see that if he were not love he would not, could not create. I know nothing deeper in him than love, nor believe there is in him anything deeper than love--nay, that there can be anything deeper than love. The being of God is love, therefore creation. I imagine that from all eternity he has been creating. As he saw it was not good for man to be alone, so has he never been alone himself;--from all eternity the Father has had the Son, and the never-begun existence of that Son I imagine an easy outgoing of the Father's nature; while to make other beings--beings like us, I imagine the labour of a God, an eternal labour. Speaking after our poor human fashions of thought--the only fashions possible to us--I imagine that God has never been contented to be alone even with the Son of his love, the prime and perfect idea of humanity, but that he has from the first willed and laboured to give existence to other creatures who should be blessed with his blessedness--creatures whom he is now and always has been developing into likeness with that Son--a likeness for long to be distant and small, but a likeness to be for ever growing: perhaps never one of them yet, though unspeakably blessed, has had even an approximate idea of the blessedness in store for him.

Let no soul think that to say God undertook a hard labour in willing that many sons and daughters should be sharers of the divine nature, is to abate his glory! The greater the difficulty, the greater is the glory of him who does the thing he has undertaken--without shadow of compromise, with no half-success, but with a triumph of absolute satisfaction to innumerable radiant souls! He knew what it would cost!--not energy of

will alone, or merely that utterance and separation from himself which is but the first of creation, though that may well itself be pain--but sore suffering such as we cannot imagine, and could only be God's, in the bringing out, call it birth or development, of the God--life in the individual soul--a suffering still renewed, a labour thwarted ever by that soul itself, compelling him to take, still at the cost of suffering, the not absolutely best, only the best possible means left him by the resistance of his creature. Man finds it hard to get what he wants, because he does not want the best; God finds it hard to give, because he would give the best, and man will not take it. What Jesus did, was what the Father is always doing; the suffering he endured was that of the Father from the foundation of the world, reaching its climax in the person of his Son. God provides the sacrifice; the sacrifice is himself. He is always, and has ever been, sacrificing himself to and for his creatures. It lies in the very essence of his creation of them. The worst heresy, next to that of dividing religion and righteousness, is to divide the Father from the Son--in thought or feeling or action or intent; to represent the Son as doing that which the Father does not himself do. Jesus did nothing but what the Father did and does. If Jesus suffered for men, it was because his Father suffers for men; only he came close to men through his body and their senses, that he might bring their spirits close to his Father and their Father, so giving them life, and losing what could be lost of his own. He is God our Saviour: it is because God is our Saviour that Jesus is our Saviour. The God and Father of Jesus Christ could never possibly be satisfied with less than giving himself to his own! The unbeliever may easily imagine a better God than the common theology of the country offers him; but not the lovingest heart that ever beat can even reflect the length and breadth and depth and height of that love of God which shows itself in his Son--one, and of one mind, with himself. The whole history is a divine agony to give divine life to creatures. The outcome of that agony, the victory of that creative and again creative energy, will be radiant life, whereof joy unspeakable is the flower. Every child will look in the eyes of the Father, and the eyes of the Father will receive the child with an infinite embrace.

The life the Lord came to give us is a life exceeding that of the highest undivine man, by far more than the life of that man exceeds the life of the animal the least human. More and more of it is for each who will receive it, and to eternity. The Father has given to the Son to have life in himself; that life is our light. We know life only as light; it is the life in us that makes us see. All the growth of the Christian is the more and more life he is receiving. At first his religion may hardly be distinguishable from the mere prudent desire to save his soul; but at last he loses that very soul in the glory of love, and so saves it; self becomes but the cloud on which the white light of God divides into harmonies unspeakable.

'In the midst of life we are in death,' said one; it is more true that in the midst of death we are in life. Life is the only reality; what men call death is but a shadow--a word for that which cannot be--a negation, owing the very idea of itself to that which it would deny. But for life there could be no death. If God were not, there would not even be nothing. Not even nothingness preceded life. Nothingness owes its very idea to existence.

One form of the question between matter and spirit is, which was first, and caused the other--things or thoughts; whether things without thought caused thought, or thought without things caused things. To those who cannot doubt that thought was first, causally preceding the earliest material show, it is easily plain that death can be the cure for nothing, that the cure for everything must be life--that the ills which come with existence, are from its imperfection, not of itself--that what we need is more of it. We who are, have nothing to do with death; our relations are alone with life. The thing that can mourn can mourn only from lack; it cannot mourn because of being, but because of not enough being. We are vessels of life, not yet full of the wine of life; where the wine does not reach, there the clay cracks, and aches, and is

distressed. Who would therefore pour out the wine that is there, instead of filling to the brim with more wine! All the being must partake of essential being; life must be assisted, upheld, comforted, every part, with life. Life is the law, the food, the necessity of life. Life is everything. Many doubtless mistake the joy of life for life itself; and, longing after the joy, languish with a thirst at once poor and inextinguishable; but even that thirst points to the one spring. These love self, not life, and self is but the shadow of life. When it is taken for life itself, and set as the man's centre, it becomes a live death in the man, a devil he worships as his god; the worm of the death eternal he clasps to his bosom as his one joy!

The soul compact of harmonies has more life, a larger being, than the soul consumed of cares; the sage is a larger life than the clown; the poet is more alive than the man whose life flows out that money may come in; the man who loves his fellow is infinitely more alive than he whose endeavour is to exalt himself above him; the man who strives to be better, than he who longs for the praise of the many; but the man to whom God is all in all, who feels his life-roots hid with Christ in God, who knows himself the inheritor of all wealth and worlds and ages, yea, of power essential and in itself, that man has begun to be alive indeed.

Let us in all the troubles of life remember--that our one lack is life--that what we need is more life--more of the life-making presence in us making us more, and more largely, alive. When most oppressed, when most weary of life, as our unbelief would phrase it, let us bethink ourselves that it is in truth the inroad and presence of death we are weary of. When most inclined to sleep, let us rouse ourselves to live. Of all things let us avoid the false refuge of a weary collapse, a hopeless yielding to things as they are. It is the life in us that is discontented; we need more of what is discontented, not more of the cause of its discontent. Discontent, I repeat, is the life in us that has not enough of itself, is not enough to itself, so calls for more. He has the victory who, in the midst of pain and weakness, cries out, not for death, not for the repose of forgetfulness, but for strength to fight; for more power, more consciousness of being, more God in him; who, when sorest wounded, says with Sir Andrew Barton in the old ballad:--

Fight on my men, says Sir Andrew Barton,

I am hurt, but I am not slain;

I'll lay me down and bleed awhile,

And then I'll rise and fight again;

--and that with no silly notion of playing the hero--what have creatures like us to do with heroism who are not yet barely honest!--but because so to fight is the truth, and the only way.

If, in the extreme of our exhaustion, there should come to us, as to Elijah when he slept in the desert, an angel to rouse us, and show us the waiting bread and water, how would we carry ourselves? Would we, in faint unwillingness to rise and eat, answer, 'Lo I am weary unto death! The battle is gone from me! It is lost, or unworth gaining! The world is too much for me! Its forces will not heed me! They have worn me out! I have wrought no salvation even for my own, and never should work any, were I to live for ever! It is enough; let me now return whence I came; let me be gathered to my fathers and be at rest!?' I should be loth to think that, if the enemy, in recognizable shape, came roaring upon us, we would not, like the red-cross knight, stagger, heavy sword in nerveless arm, to meet him; but, in the feebleness of foiled effort, it wants yet more faith to rise and partake of the food that shall bring back more effort, more travail, more weariness. The true man trusts in a strength which is not his, and which he does not feel, does not even always desire; believes in a power that seems far from him, which is yet at the root of his fatigue

itself and his need of rest--rest as far from death as is labour. To trust in the strength of God in our weakness; to say, 'I am weak: so let me be: God is strong;' to seek from him who is our life, as the natural, simple cure of all that is amiss with us, power to do, and be, and live, even when we are weary,--this is the victory that overcometh the world. To believe in God our strength in the face of all seeming denial, to believe in him out of the heart of weakness and unbelief, in spite of numbness and weariness and lethargy; to believe in the wide-awake real, through all the stupefying, enervating, distorting dream; to will to wake, when the very being seems athirst for a godless repose;--these are the broken steps up to the high fields where repose is but a form of strength, strength but a form of joy, joy but a form of love. 'I am weak,' says the true soul, 'but not so weak that I would not be strong; not so sleepy that I would not see the sun rise; not so lame but that I would walk! Thanks be to him who perfects strength in weakness, and gives to his beloved while they sleep!'

If we will but let our God and Father work his will with us, there can be no limit to his enlargement of our existence, to the flood of life with which he will overflow our consciousness. We have no conception of what life might be, of how vast the consciousness of which we could be made capable. Many can recall some moment in which life seemed richer and fuller than ever before; to some, such moments arrive mostly in dreams: shall soul, awake or asleep, infold a bliss greater than its Life, the living God, can seal, perpetuate, enlarge? Can the human twilight of a dream be capable of generating or holding a fuller life than the morning of divine activity? Surely God could at any moment give to a soul, by a word to that soul, by breathing afresh into the secret caves of its being, a sense of life before which the most exultant ecstasy of earthly triumph would pale to ashes! If ever sunlit, sail-crowded sea, under blue heaven flecked with wind-chased white, filled your soul as with a new gift of life, think what sense of existence must be yours, if he whose thought has but fringed its garment with the outburst of such a show, take his abode with you, and while thinking the gladness of a God inside your being, let you know and feel that he is carrying you as a father in his bosom!

I have been speaking as if life and the consciousness of it were one; but the consciousness of life is not life; it is only the outcome of life. The real life is that which is of and by itself--is life because it wills itself--which is, in the active, not the passive sense: this can only be God. But in us there ought to be a life correspondent to the life that is God's; in us also must be the life that wills itself--a life in so far resembling the self-existent life and partaking of its image, that it has a share in its own being.

There is an original act possible to the man, which must initiate the reality of his existence. He must live in and by willing to live. A tree lives; I hardly doubt it has some vague consciousness, known by but not to itself, only to the God who made it; I trust that life in its lowest forms is on the way to thought and blessedness, is in the process of that separation, so to speak, from God, in which consists the creation of living souls; but the life of these lower forms is not life in the high sense--in the sense in which the word is used in the Bible: true life knows and rules itself; the eternal life is life come awake.

The life of the most exalted of the animals is not such whatever it may become, and however I may refuse to believe their fate and being fixed as we see them. But as little as any man or woman would be inclined to call the existence of the dog, looking strange lack out of his wistful eyes, an existence to be satisfied with--his life an end sufficient in itself, as little could I, looking on the human pleasure, the human refinement, the common human endeavour around me, consent to regard them as worthy the name of life.

What in them is true dwells amidst an unchallenged corruption, demanding repentance and labour and prayer for its destruction. The condition of most men and women seems to me a life in death, an abode in

unwhited sepulchres, a possession of withering forms by spirits that slumber, and babble in their dreams. That they do not feel it so, is nothing. The sow wallowing in the mire may rightly assert it her way of being clean, but theirs is not the life of the God-born. The day must come when they will hide their faces with such shame as the good man yet feels at the memory of the time when he lived like them.

There is nothing for man worthy to be called life, but the life eternal--God's life, that is, after his degree shared by the man made to be eternal also. For he is in the image of God, intended to partake of the life of the most high, to be alive as he is alive. Of this life the outcome and the light is righteousness, love, grace, truth; but the life itself is a thing that will not be defined, even as God will not be defined: it is a power, the formless cause of form. It has no limits whereby to be defined.

It shows itself to the soul that is hungering and thirsting after righteousness, but that soul cannot show it to another, save in the shining of its own light. The ignorant soul understands by this life eternal only an endless elongation of consciousness; what God means by it is a being like his own, a being beyond the attack of decay or death, a being so essential that it has no relation whatever to nothingness; a something which is, and can never go to that which is not, for with that it never had to do, but came out of the heart of Life, the heart of God, the fountain of being; an existence partaking of the divine nature, and having nothing in common, any more than the Eternal himself, with what can pass or cease: God owes his being to no one, and his child has no lord but his Father.

This life, this eternal life, consists for man in absolute oneness with God and all divine modes of being, oneness with every phase of right and harmony. It consists in a love as deep as it is universal, as conscious as it is unspeakable; a love that can no more be reasoned about than life itself--a love whose presence is its all-sufficing proof and justification, whose absence is an annihilating defect: he who has it not cannot believe in it: how should death believe in life, though all the birds of God are singing jubilant over the empty tomb! The delight of such a being, the splendour of a consciousness rushing from the wide open doors of the fountain of existence, the ecstasy of the spiritual sense into which the surge of life essential, immortal, increate, flows in silent fulness from the heart of hearts--what may it, what must it not be, in the great day of God and the individual soul!

What then is our practical relation to the life original? What have we to do towards the attaining to the resurrection from the dead? If we did not make, could not have made ourselves, how can we, now we are made, do anything at the unknown roots of our being? What relation of conscious unity can be betwixt the self-existent God, and beings who live at the will of another, beings who could not refuse to be--cannot even cease to be, but must, at the will of that other, go on living, weary of what is not life, able to assert their relation to life only by refusing to be content with what is not life?

The self-existent God is that other by whose will we live; so the links of the unity must already exist, and can but require to be brought together. For the link in our being wherewith to close the circle of immortal oneness with the Father, we must of course search the deepest of man's nature: there only, in all assurance, can it be found. And there we do find it. For the will is the deepest, the strongest, the divinest thing in man; so, I presume, is it in God, for such we find it in Jesus Christ.

Here, and here only, in the relation of the two wills, God's and his own, can a man come into vital contact--on the eternal idea, in no one-sided unity of completest dependence, but in willed harmony of dual oneness--with the All-in-all. When a man can and does entirely say, 'Not my will, but thine be done'--when he so wills the will of God as to do it, then is he one with God--one, as a true son with a true

father. When a man wills that his being be conformed to the being of his origin, which is the life in his life, causing and bearing his life, therefore absolutely and only of its kind, one with it more and deeper than words or figures can say--to the life which is itself, only more of itself, and more than itself, causing itself--when the man thus accepts his own causing life, and sets himself to live the will of that causing life, humbly eager after the privileges of his origin,--thus receiving God, he becomes, in the act, a partaker of the divine nature, a true son of the living God, and an heir of all he possesses: by the obedience of a son, he receives into himself the very life of the Father.

Obedience is the joining of the links of the eternal round. Obedience is but the other side of the creative will. Will is God's will, obedience is man's will; the two make one. The root-life, knowing well the thousand troubles it would bring upon him, has created, and goes on creating other lives, that, though incapable of self-being, they may, by willed obedience, share in the bliss of his essential self-ordained being. If we do the will of God, eternal life is ours--no mere continuity of existence, for that in itself is worthless as hell, but a being that is one with the essential Life, and so within his reach to fill with the abundant and endless out-goings of his love.

Our souls shall be vessels ever growing, and ever as they grow, filled with the more and more life proceeding from the Father and the Son, from God the ordaining, and God the obedient. What the delight of the being, what the abundance of the life he came that we might have, we can never know until we have it. But even now to the holy fancy it may sometimes seem too glorious to support--as if we must die of very life--of more being than we could bear--to awake to a yet higher life, and be filled with a wine which our souls were heretofore too weak to hold!

To be for one moment aware of such pure simple love towards but one of my fellows as I trust I shall one day have towards each, must of itself bring a sense of life such as the utmost effort of my imagination can but feebly shadow now--a mighty glory of consciousness!--not to be always present, indeed, for my love, and not my glory in that love, is my life. There would be, even in that one love, in the simple purity of a single affection such as we were created to generate, and intended to cherish, towards all, an expansion of life inexpressible, unutterable.

For we are made for love, not for self. Our neighbour is our refuge; self is our demon-foe. Every man is the image of God to every man, and in proportion as we love him, we shall know the sacred fact. The precious thing to human soul is, and one day shall be known to be, every human soul. And if it be so between man and man, how will it not be betwixt the man and his maker, between the child and his eternal Father, between the created and the creating Life? Must not the glory of existence be endlessly redoubled in the infinite love of the creature--for all love is infinite--to the infinite God, the great one life, than whom is no other--only shadows, lovely shadows of him!

Reader to whom my words seem those of inflation and foolish excitement, it can be nothing to thee to be told that I seem to myself to speak only the words of truth and soberness; but what if the cause why they seem other to thy mind be--not merely that thou art not whole, but that thy being nowise thirsts after harmony, that thou art not of the truth, that thou hast not yet begun to live? How should the reveller, issuing worn and wasted from the haunts where the violent seize joy by force to find her perish in their arms--how should such reveller, I say, break forth and sing with the sons of the morning, when the ocean of light bursts from the fountain of the east? As little canst thou, with thy mind full of petty cares, or still more petty ambitions, understand the groaning and travailing of the creation. It may indeed be that thou art honestly desirous of saving thy own wretched soul, but as yet thou canst know but little of thy need of him

who is the first and the last and the living one.

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