



The Spirituality of the Beloved Evan Lature

Bible reading: 1 John 4:9-19

I was having a bike ride one night when I remembered one conversation with a man I respect and love so dear. We meet once a month over lunch, enjoy each other's company while we swap stories. It's always been a lunch I look forward to every month. Last time when I walked him home after lunch, I asked him if he was familiar with Henri Nouwen. He said he was and that led us to a conversation about spirituality. It was only a couple minutes talk since his home is only about 10 minute-walk. But oddly, that small chat popped up back stronger in my mind while I was on my bike enjoying the summer evening.

Spirituality. How would we define spirituality?

- "The quality that involves deep feelings and beliefs of a religious nature, rather than the physical parts of life." (Cambridge dictionary)
- "Spiritual means relating to people's thoughts and beliefs, rather than to their bodies and physical surroundings." (Collins dictionary)
- "Relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things." (Oxford dictionary)

In April 2017, Barna published their research about people today who call themselves spiritual but not religious. The "spiritual but not religious" hold much looser ideas about God, spiritual practices, and religion. The research classified American adults into 4 categories according to their belief: Spiritual but religious who identify as a member of a religious faith; Spiritual but religious who don't identify with a religious faith at all, Practicing Christianity (Those who attend a religious service at least once a month, who say their faith is very important in their lives and self-identify), and Evangelicals (those who have made personal commitment to Jesus Christ). Among these 4 groups, group number 1 (32%) and number 2 (22%) are the biggest groups who believe that God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach, group 3 gets 5%, and it is 0% in group number 4.

What does Bible say about spirituality?

It is pretty clear in the Bible God introduced Himself to His people as God (YHWH). He was the Alpha and Omega, the maker of heaven and earth who set purposes for all creation according to His unfathomable mind. God isn't a state of higher consciousness nor some transcendent experience in

which one gains a satisfaction. In the Bible, God is introduced as The One with whom we can connect, relate to in person. When he appeared to Moses in a burning bush, He told Moses His name, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3: 14).

It's very important to understand that The One we call God is not something that our mind comes up with or just some like fancy advance thing that humans can create with their own minds. God is a greater reality outside human existence, yet in Christianity He reveals Himself and wants to connect with humanity.

Christian spirituality is not a gnostic renunciation of the created world nor the Platonic flight of the soul from the body. The world is the object of God's love (John 3:16), and we are to glorify God in our bodies (Rom 12:1 ; 1 Cor 6:19-20). Spirituality must be practiced in this world, which God made good (Mark 7:19) and which God is in the process of redeeming (Rom 8:18-25). Christian spirituality begins with our redemption in Christ. We are baptized into Christ: We die to sin and the "old man" and we are made alive to God as a new creation. (Rom 6:3-11 ; 2 Cor 5:17).

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/spirituality/>

Christian spirituality is different than Christian theology that only operates in the intellectual area. Don't get me wrong. I'm not against intellectualism. I'm totally in it. I'm myself a thinker. I think a lot to the point where I overthink something. In the academic world, you and I are trained to scrutinize things, and therefore we objectify truth, set a distance from it, and try to be a master over it. Philip Yancey wrote once, "We reduce things into parts, but can we fit together the whole? ... Knowing the parts doesn't necessarily help us understand the whole." (*Rumors of Another World: What On Earth Are We Missing?*)

Christian spirituality is all about experiencing the wholeness of God in close, intimate relationship. Here, rather than acting like an expert scrutinizing God into parts, we ourselves hunger and thirst for His righteousness and long to be filled by Him. We bring our wounds, our pasts, vulnerabilities, shortcomings, desires to the ever-present God whose wisdom and ways cannot be fathomed by our mind and strength. Here, rather than conquering, we surrender; rather than overcoming we rest. To experience that we are known and loved by God is everything.

Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus

Meet Nabeel Qureshi. He was a man who grew up as a devout Moslem in a Pakistani family in the US. By the age of 5, he had read the entire Qur'an in Arabic and had memorized many chapters. His parents also trained him in apologetics so that he would not only believe in Islam but could defend it and refute other religions like Christianity. In *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, Nabeel describes his

dramatic journey from Islam to Christianity, complete with friendships, investigations, and supernatural dreams along the way to find himself resting in God's unfathomable love.

His genuine friendship with a Christian ushered him to investigate Islam and Christianity objectively. Nabeel is a bright guy -he was one of the six students who got an academic honor on his graduation day. He scrutinized Christianity and Islam in his search of knowing the true God. In his investigation, he found so many problematic materials in Islam as opposed to what he found to be more objectively accepted in Christianity. Nevertheless, finding the objective truth in Christianity didn't automatically make him surrender. At this critical point, though he had seen evidence after evidence that favored Christianity, this smart guy didn't fall in easily just because Christianity satisfied his investigating mind. He wanted more. I would say by God's grace Nabeel was aware of human's inability to arrive at objective truth. This situation put him at unease. Now he was so broken, so confused, and so alone. One night he laid prostrate in a large Muslim prayer hall, with tears blurring his sight, he prayed to God:

"Please, God Almighty, tell me who You are. I beseech You and only You. Only You can rescue me. At your feet I lay down everything I have learned, and I give my entire life to You. Take away what You will, be it my joy, my friends, my family, or even my life. But let me have You, O God. Light the path that I must walk. I don't care how many hurdles are in the way, how many pits I must jump over or climb out of, or how many thorns I must step through. Guide me on the right path. If it is Islam, show me how it is true. If it is Christianity, give me eyes to see. Just show me which path is Yours, dear God, so I can walk it.

Dear God, I know You can hear me! I know You are there and my words are not falling on deaf ears. Do not withhold Yourself from me. You have guided me with visions before. You have revealed the future to my father in dreams. Please, show me Your truth. Give me a vision again, give me dreams so I can know who You are!" (Seeking Allah Finding Jesus, p.254)

I read this book in 2014 and I found myself tearing up in the part which I just quoted. Something about Nabeel's raw honesty and his inability to reach out to God struck a chord with a deep unquenchable longing in my soul for God.

I love stories. For me stories move me in a powerful way that a set of doctrines and teaching can't do. There's an aspect of intimacy and closeness in stories. I'm glad that the Bible itself in essence is a story of a loving God who's proactively searching for and redeeming His beloved ones. In my spiritual journey as a Christian, to understand the whole Bible story as such help me be closer to the heart of God. Let me take you for a while to the story in the Bible.

Creation. The Bible begins with creation and ends with new creation. From the account of Genesis we know that humans are created in God's image and placed within time and space which is called earth. God has a beautiful purpose for all creation which he has made. Here we have ideas of who we are and where we are. Here humans enjoy relational shalom: shalom with God, shalom with other human, shalom with other creation, and shalom within selves.

Fall. Nevertheless, the fullness of humanity is damaged by human disobedience and rebellion against the Creator God. Evil and sin weaved their way into every aspect of God's creation and every dimension of human personhood and life on earth: physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Physically, humans face death and painful toil in their lives. Intellectually, humans abuse their capability to satisfy themselves, which ironically can never be. Socially, relationships hallmarked by *shalom* are now shattered apart because everyone now is self-centered, envious, and malicious. Spiritually, they fill the void in their souls with false gods (power, intellectual, sex, money, romantic love, career, status, education, etc). Yet God's image within humans isn't fully faded. They still have potential to do good, to love, to care, and to long.

Since the fall, there has been a voice within humans conjuring a perfect world that humanity once had. It is a romanticism that will never be quenched until it's satisfied. It is a mysticism that can only be fulfilled by the divine power. Whether humans are aware of it or not, the voice keeps calling. Sometimes they catch a glimpse of the yonder perfect world in a death of someone they love, in a cry of a newborn baby, in the beauty of nature, or in things they never fully grasp after tons of relentless efforts to nail them down. Nevertheless, they will never be able to save themselves since the fall has deeply taken a toll. Though they could hear the voice and catch a glance of goodness from a distance, they remain a hopeless lover trying to remember the lost paradise.

Redemption. Praise God! The "Great I Am" doesn't forsake us in our miserable condition. He who created us and all of creation is not just watching from up above. He made himself tangible. He trod the journey to the fallen world. He was the Word, was with God, and was God himself (John 1:1). He is the shepherd looking for a lost lamb. He is the knight who brings the light to the lonely and cold nights of the hopeless lover. He is the King who emptied himself and took on human flesh for a mission to save us. He is Jesus the shepherd and the lover of our soul.

In Jesus, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). In Jesus, God offered His unconditional love. In Jesus, the voice that has been haunting us since the Fall now can be heard loudly and the mystery is seen crystal clear. It is the voice of the Heavenly Father saying how He loves us; it is the vivid picture of how God took the Golgotha path to die for you and me. He did it all because of love. *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin." (1 John 4:10)*

Loved by God

Victor Hugo once wrote, "Life's great happiness is to be convinced we are loved." I echo Victor Hugo! So often in my attempts to make my life more meaningful, nothing is more powerful and comforting than to know that I am deeply loved. I told you earlier a story of a man I respect and love so dear with whom I have lunch once a month. I wonder what makes me look forward to that meeting every month. As I think about it, I know it's simply because I feel loved by him.

With that, I know how much more my Heavenly Father is loving me. I am accepted in Christ, and I can rest in His love.

That night when I was thinking about spirituality while I was on my bike, I didn't quite understand why out of the blue that conversation with Scott Moreau -the man from whom I feel loved popped up back in my mind. Now I know it was a gently reminder from my Heavenly Father above of how I am loved by God. And I confident to say that's the core of the spirituality of the beloved.

I wonder if God was a musician and got a guitar near Him, what kind of song that He would sing to you and me His beloved? What kind of song would He sing to express His deep love for us so that we know we are loved by Him? I think it is this song: You are the Lily of the Valley.

You are the Lily of the Valley
By Unknown

You are the lily of the valley 3x
I love you
You are the rose of Sharon 3x
I love you
You are the fairest of ten thousand 3x
I love you
Sing Halleluya Halleluya 3x
I love you
You are the lily of the valley 3x I love you

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