### “What Gives Life,” by S. Finlan, August 26, 2018

**Psalm 34:17–18**

17 When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. 18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.

**Ephesians 6:10–14, 18**

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. . . .

18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

**John 6:58, 61–63**

58 “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever”. . . .

61But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? 62Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

These three readings are all quite different, but I’m going to try to weave them together. I’ll start with a dynamite line from the gospel: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless” (John 6:63). This is not talking about *material* life, but *spiritual* life and *eternal* life. The things that really matter for spiritual life are truth, beauty, love, goodness, purpose, service, harmony. I wish we could focus on those things all day, *every* day.

But we do have to deal with the material world, and the things that make *material* life possible. We are challenged by the many dangers of this world, and by the injustice and misunderstanding that are so common here. Often, it seems that no good deed goes unpunished. *Can* we live with faith and trust in a world so cruel and chaotic? We can. We have to be realistic, work hard, do our best in both spiritual *and* material ways, and then trust God to move us closer to where we should be. *We* have to do all that is humanly possible before we can ask God to add something extra. Even then, we have to be patient and accept *God’s* timing, not *our* timing. We need to *show* that we are truly learning to live in the light.

Living spiritually puts us on the path of character growth, maturity, and a growing vision of what our personal mission in life is. Jesus walks *with* us along this path. He knows what we have experienced, and he knows our amazing potential to do more, and *be* more.

We need to become master weavers—blending the threads of everyday needs with spiritual purpose and *performance*. Jesus showed us that it is possible. We can keep our focus spiritual, even while we exercise social and material common sense.

The spiritual side of life has to do with growth and service. God knows where we can be of service. God doesn’t bolster our power. Nor do I think God steps in to rescue us from circumstances. So I have to partially disagree with the kindhearted but naïve hope that I find expressed in Psalm 34:17: “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.” Well, *sometimes* amazing rescues do happen, but often they do *not*. We cannot afford to act carelessly, thinking that God will rescue us. Often, the innocent suffer terribly. But God does go *with* us through all our troubles. We are not left alone in a room without doors or windows.

The line from the psalm that I really want to affirm is the next one, verse 18: “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:18). It speaks of God’s *nearness* and compassion, and it implies that the rescuing is internal and spiritual, when we’re crushed *in spirit*.

That’s more what really happens. Rather than rescuing us from every trouble or every material situation, God gives us *wisdom* that helps us keep our priorities straight and our principles solid. Rather than solving our problems *for* us, God empowers us to be wise, to learn from experience, and to solve our *own* problems.

Isn’t this better in the long run? When you were in school, you might have wanted the answers to be just given to you, but didn’t you become wiser by studying and learning for yourself?

So, I’m trying to develop a balanced approach here. I’m saying go ahead and be as spiritually idealistic as you can. Hold on to the best spiritual values, because *that is what you will become*. You become like what you love!

But also be practical and recognize that your values are not magic carpets or escape hatches. There is misfortune and danger in the world that can afflict us. Further, there really is evil, and people often *choose* to embrace it. Humans are fully capable of doing evil on their own initiative, without any help from the devil. Human dishonesty and selfishness are enough to explain the evildoing in the world.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians does not absolve us of responsibility for our choices, but he *does* believe in demonic forces. He sees believers as engaged in spiritual battle with evil cosmic powers and rebel angels. However, this view of powerful demonic figures differs in an important way from what is said in Colossians 2, where Jesus “*disarmed* the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them” (Col 2:15). In Ephesians 6, these heavenly rulers don’t seem disarmed or triumphed-over *at all*. So which one is it?

Maybe Jesus can solve this dilemma. In the Gospel of Luke, he says “I watched Satan fall from heaven” (10:18)—so, in the presence of Jesus, Satanwas *deposed*. Again, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says “*Now* is the judgment of this world; *now* the ruler of this world will be driven out” (12:31). So, Satan is already deposed, and has no power here. But humans still have the freedom to commit evil. They don’t need the devil for that.

Human evil needs now to have *human* explanations. So again, I am returned to the message of personal responsibility, and of moral integrity. We must focus spiritually, knowing that it is the *Spirit* that gives life, but we also use social wisdom and material common sense.

We have the power to choose to love, learn, and share what we have learned. We can choose to trust God and be guided by the Spirit, using Jesus as our inspiration in our pursuit of truth and love. We can focus on *spiritual* goals, instead of immediate needs or desires.

I will end with a prayer.

Dear God, let us trust and grow in faith in you, and allow your extraordinary love to fill our lives, your truth to fill our minds, your beauty to touch our emotions, until they become *our* lovingkindness, *our* truth, and even *our* beauty.

And Jesus, we pray that we become a little more like you, every day.

Amen.