

**LIVING AS IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD:
MAKING THE EFFORT**

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I'd like to begin by congratulating the Americans on their national day--Independence Day. I think that it illustrates something about the organisers of this conference, who are Americans, that they should schedule me, a foreigner, to address you on America's national day. In doing this they give clear recognition of the fact that the Fifth Epochal Revelation to mankind is intended for all people, irrespective of national and cultural loyalties, so I think they deserve some congratulation for this gesture towards that fact. The gesture does not surprise me, mind you, but I would like to give it some recognition all the same.

I am to talk to you about "Living as in the presence of God," and I'd better start by admitting that I don't know any more about it than any of you. How could I? Everything to do with our relationship with God is in the nature of personal experience. It is simply not possible for one human being to have much direct understanding of another human being's relationship with God, because relationships between personalities are things in themselves -- unique.

And if this is true of our relationships with one another, how much more true is it of our relationships with God? If, as the Solitary Messenger tells us, all true relationships have survival potential, that they are never merely part of the transient scaffolding destined to wither away upon a material death, then this must also be true of our relationship with God, upon which the possibility of survival itself hangs. So we can only communicate the quality of our relationship with God to our fellows obliquely, through the osmosis of empathy, and rarely with much precision.

It follows that "Living as in the presence of God" is going to mean rather different things to different people. Generalisations about it will be pretty tenuous. Nevertheless, such generalisations can provide focal points around which we can compare our personal experience, so I'll tell you some of the things I've been thinking about this topic, some of the generalisations I've made and the conclusions I've reached. It is up to you to say when my thinking connects with yours in some way: when you agree or disagree, take a different approach, or feel that I've missed the point.

Even though generalisations are suspect, we have to start somewhere, and to me the obvious starting point is the clear and unequivocal acknowledgement that we are all, continuously, in the presence of God, whether we live as if this were the case or whether we don't. Here on Urantia, every normal-minded person is indwelt by a Thought Adjuster, an actual fragment of pre-personal Deity, which shares our life and seeks our co-operation.

Every normal-minded person is, whether he knows it or not, whether he believes in God or not, actually in the presence of God from the moment of his first moral choice until his physical death. All students of The Urantia Book recognise this as one of the great revelations the book makes to us. And it means that "Living as in the presence of God" constitutes conscious recognition of something which is a fact. We all actually live in the presence of God. "In him we live, move, and have our being." This is a fact. To live "as if" in his presence is thus to make conscious recognition of the fact, to make real to ourselves something which really is.

Well, if we are in the presence of God, why don't we all live as if what we know is actually true? If we know it, why don't we live it?

Here's my story. When, eight or nine months ago, I discovered that my subject today was to be "Living as in the presence of God," I decided to try to develop my talk upon the foundation of first-hand experience. "Right," I thought, "I'm now going to spend a few months really intensively living as in the presence of God so that when I get to Snowmass, I can really give them something to think about."

Every day I made the decision half a dozen times, and every day I kept failing to do it, and the more often I made the decision the more often I promptly forgot about it, and after a while things began to look a bit desperate, because I began to realise that I was going to have to stand up here today without knowing what I was talking about. Was I face to face with the possibility that Murphy's Law is of universal application rather than merely a planetary phenomenon?

Well, as you can see, I still don't know what I'm talking about. But eventually I reached the conclusion that "Living as in the presence of God" is just not something that I could do at will. I was reminded how the Melchizedek author of Paper 100 emphasises that we cannot love our fellows by a mere act of will. Neither, it seems, can we live as in the presence of God by a mere act of will. In my own case the question arose as to why I wanted to live as in the presence of God--what was my motive? Clearly, the hope that I would be able to talk to you today without making a fool of myself is not an adequate reason.

As I reflected on this, it occurred to me that something rather peculiar was going on. I knew for a fact that I was in the presence of God. We all are, all the time. Yet I seemed unable to make this real enough to myself to actually live as if it were the case. It's something that's familiar to me in another form. Students of The Urantia Book recognise the distinction which is made between belief and faith. Belief in God is the intellectual acceptance of the fact of God, while faith both incorporates belief and puts it into practice.

It is quite possible to believe in God without allowing this to have much effect on our attitude, behaviour and habits. But not so faith. Faith indicates that belief has become real to us to the extent that our lives are transformed, our behaviour and habits are altered, our efforts to live up to our ideals are intensified. Faith in God implies that we trust him, that we accept that what he wants is the best thing which can be wanted and that the attempt to do what he wants is thus the best possible thing to do. Faith is lived out. Belief is a purely intellectual phenomenon.

So I think you can now see why I was having so much trouble in cultivating the habit of "Living as in the presence of God." I believed it all right. I believed I was in the presence of God. But I obviously didn't have faith in it because I wasn't doing it. Action is the test of faith; is it happening? In my case it wasn't.

But wait, the story has a happy ending. A bit of hindsight helps.

It's now clear that my own efforts to gather material for this talk by living as in the presence of God were futile because I was trying to do it for all the wrong reasons.

I was very frustrated, but I continued to work on the talk--I knew I had to say something--and gradually it began to occur to me that living as in the presence of God must be pretty similar to worship. I myself was not trying to do it in order to worship God, but primarily to save myself embarrassment here today. I did not suddenly develop the ability to move into worship mode whenever I felt like it. I've never been able to do that, and I still can't. But when I do worship, I find myself communing with God--just being a child spending time with the most wonderfully perfect parent, and this really is "living as in the presence of God." The book refers to this as "a conditioned spiritual reflex," by which it means, I think, that the effort to live in God's presence, when successful, induces the attitude of worship.

Now in my own case, as I begin to feel about me for the presence of God, there seems always to arise a suggestion of Jesus. He taught that no one approaches the Father except through him. Michael of Nebadon is "the way, the truth and the life" for a whole local universe, and his life here as Jesus is our clue to contact with God. Anyone who has seen a Paradise Creator Son has seen the Father, and we have figuratively seen Michael as Jesus. There is no better guide into the presence of the Father than

Jesus, and The Urantia Book reveals Jesus rather well. The way to living as in the presence of God, our indwelling Adjuster, is through Jesus.

It has been a great relief to me to discover this fact, which now seems so obvious. The presence of God which is inside us all the time--our indwelling Adjuster--remains a trifle mysterious to us because it functions on the prepersonal level, a level of which we personal beings are not directly conscious. But the personal presence of Michael of Nebadon is something much less mysterious to us, something we respond to more readily both because of his life as Jesus, and because of the functioning of his Spirit of Truth.

Who but Michael would abrogate the law of Murphy by the act of mercy, as we find the presence of the Adjuster through Jesus? He really is "the way, the truth and the life." And as a result I've had something to talk to you about!

I've always thought that one of the privileges of leading a discussion is that one gets to introduce one's pet themes into the discussion at hand. One of my pet themes is to add a little cautionary note when extolling the virtue of doing God's will. I do not think that "Living as in the presence of God" is a legitimate way of having God make your decisions for you. The indwelling Adjuster--God inside each of us--is not cultivating a spiritual yes-man. When the Chief of Midwayers advises us to "not be so slothful as to ask God to solve your difficulties," he is simply reinforcing this idea.

The Adjuster hopes to achieve personality by fusion with us and probably wants a robust, active and confident fusion-partner who brings something of his own experience and nature into the fused entity. The Adjuster, I suggest to you, is not hoping to fuse with a supine moral jellyfish without real individuality who wants to be told what to do all the time. The Adjuster would prefer us to try, fail, and learn from the experience than to do nothing because of being uncertain about God's (i.e., the Adjuster's own) will in the matter. The Adjuster dominates only by consent, when we ourselves have accepted that the Adjuster's guidance (God's will) is the best course of action. And this requires that we engage in trial-and-error decisions, finding out for ourselves that God's way is the best way.

"Living as in the presence of God" is thus not to be seen simply as a way of having all the right decisions made for us. Rather should we look at it as a stimulus to worship, from which we derive the strength and determination to continue to make our own decisions. It really is a free-will universe. God might give us all sorts of help, but we ourselves actually decide.

So far we have been dealing with this topic from the standpoint of a solitary person seeking the presence of God. It occurred to me that way, I think, primarily because of the connection, in my own mind, between the presence of God and worship. But most of our lives are lived in the company of other people, and it can be rather difficult or inappropriate to achieve the communion of worship in a busy office, at a noisy party or in many of our day-to-day social situations.

Nevertheless, it is often these situations which call for our best efforts. Here we are talking about the attitude of service, where we find our best opportunities for helping our fellows by putting our ideals into practice, by living out our highest concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness. This is where we can live out brotherly love, and in the process lend beneficial influence to the institutions our civilisation has evolved to regulate our relations with one another. This sphere of active service is where we have the opportunity to participate in the process of causing spirit to dominate matter through the exercise of mind in the presence of unifying personality.

In this way we tend to contribute more effectively to social progress if we go about our daily lives "as in the presence of God." This reminds us that all effort sincerely motivated by spirit, by the urge toward truth, beauty and goodness, is worthwhile in some way. We may not be able to see the results of our efforts or be able to understand just how they may be worthwhile, but to make these efforts, "as in the presence of God," is to be encouraged to go on trying anyway.

We gain the confidence to press on without knowing the results of our actions, trusting in the knowledge that the truth we live, the beauty we create and the good that we do somehow register in the

Supreme, contributing to his growth, being of service somehow, sometime, somewhere. To go on doing our best in the absence of direct positive feedback can be very discouraging unless we bear in mind that nothing worthwhile is ever lost. Even if we, ourselves, as personalities are lost, and fail to survive, anything worthwhile we did during our lives is preserved as part of the Supreme. Trying to do whatever we do "as in the presence of God" helps us to keep this encouraging reality in front of us.

And like me, I suspect, you have discovered that this presence of God at the back of our minds is Michael, whom we know as Jesus. We know enough of how he lived and worked, of how he interacted with his fellow men, to perceive clues and insights into the handling of any and every earthly situation or experience. The life he lived and the gospel he taught equip us with assistance which is so general in nature that its application is universal. No matter what we do, we can improve upon our performance by keeping his teaching in our mind. Because he lived his life in a finite material setting, it is fairly easy to place him in most of our own situations.

So even though our lives are too busy to spend much of our work day in worshipful communion with our indwelling Adjusters, we can always make room in our minds for the inspiration of Jesus, and this is how we "live as in the presence of God" in the active and social parts of our lives.

Well, that gives you an idea of how I've been thinking about "Living as in the presence of God." It's a habit which, in solitary contemplation, can lead us into worship as we seek to strengthen ourselves and seek wisdom for more effective service. On the other hand, in those parts of our lives where we have the opportunity for service, the habit stimulates and encourages us to persevere.

And this is appropriate when we consider the fundamental message of the gospel of Jesus, that we know God as our spiritual Father and men as our brothers, in a family relationship of love, defined as the desire to do good to others. This truth, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, is mirrored in the two foci of our attention, the worship of the Father and the service of our fellow men.

I thought I'd finish up with this story. At a conference at Noosa, Queensland, Australia in 1989, the final speaker pointed out that we had spent three or four very fruitful and enjoyable days together, studying, discussing, socialising and generally pooling knowledge and experience. For three of four days we had been very co-operative and fraternal, and this final speaker pointed out that what we had in fact done was to spend a few days together living as we are meant to live.

And I suppose that says in a nutshell what it is like to "live as in the presence of God." It is simply to live as we are meant to live.