



Unity Church of Christianity  
The River of Life  
April 3, 2011

## **Howard Caesar**

When a person looks around today's world at all of the things that are happening—injustices, conflicts, wars, rebellions, crimes, crises—he or she may ask the question, “Where is God in all of this?” That's been a question asked through the ages of time. When various kinds of evil or hardship seem to be rampant in the world or in someone's personal life this question has come up.

The Book of Habakkuk in the Old Testament is a short book—only three chapters long. He addresses this question. Habakkuk was a prophet of Judah, dating back 600 years before Christ. Even back then they had really significant challenges and problems, to the extent that they were asking those questions, whether it was a personal question or one about the world. In this case, Habakkuk was asking in regard to his people and what was happening in the world. At that time, they were dealing with the rise of Babylon. They had just gotten over all of the challenges and problems of Assyria. Babylon was coming as a power—with all of its evils—pushing them down and making life difficult. Habakkuk was lamenting in the anguished questions of how long can we endure this, how long does this have to go on, how long must we be frustrated, and how long must we suffer? He was voicing an objection to God about the ruthless behavior of the wicked going seemingly unchecked. He asked, “Is God indifferent? How can a just God condone rampant evil in the world?”

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The answer is that so many things go on that look and feel horrific, but Habakkuk said that the righteous must stand firm in their faith and defend God's goodness in the face of an imperfect world. Yes, it is an imperfect world. The role of being righteous is to take the stand of God's goodness. He said, "Don't let your perceptions of an outer world sway you from the truth and strength of God that needs to be captured and embraced on the inner world of you." That has been the challenge at all times throughout history.

Near the end of the third chapter, Habakkuk stated, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines. The labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields yield not meat. The sheep shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls. Yet, I will rejoice in the Lord, and I will joy in the God of my salvation." He was saying that in spite of all of that, one must hold fast and persevere. There are times when nothing seems to be going right and circumstances can get you down, but you have to hold fast to what you know in terms of God being your inner strength. That strength will pull you through this and see you out of this. There is a spiritual perseverance that one must embrace.

In the New Testament, Jesus said, "In the world, you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." He was saying that He was the great example. He made it, and He did it. There is a way to see yourself through this and embrace your oneness with the Divine, no matter what it is that you may face. He did say, "If this cup can pass for me, let it." In the end, He even had to deal with that and demonstrate that overcoming.

We live in a world in which all kinds of things can happen. Various things seem evil, or what I refer to as "less than good," since we don't think of any entity trying to get us as evil. The only evil in the world is man-made evil—the result of separation in consciousness from the Divine, separation from the truth of who they are, and being that. They distance themselves. The challenge is to hang on to your faith in the midst of the mix that is going on—of the unrighteous and the righteous, of love and hate, and of those who are demonstrating degrees of oneness and those who are demonstrating separation. You're going to see all of that in this world. At times we can experience the mass attack of disillusionment and despair, which can be followed by a collapse of hope. When this invades your consciousness and thoughts, then what we know to be the truth of God can begin to fade and can be invalidated, questioned, and weakened.

It has been said that the real target of evil is to corrupt the spirit of man and bring inner disintegration. It is a challenge to see various things going on, whether it's in our personal lives or in the world. In this day and age, you know immediately what's happening on the other side of the planet. That didn't go on in many of the ages of time, obviously.

When you have that disintegration of the inner, there is almost nothing left. As one writer put it, "The very citadel of man is captured and laid waste." Therefore, anything described as evil in the world should not be allowed to move from the without onto the within of you. You have to be careful of what goes on within you. What takes place within you should be filled with the Divine and the power. That's why it's important to have prayer and meditation and quiet times—

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returning back to the truth that will set you free. The facts may say one thing, but the truth will eternally be there to be embraced.

Imagine hundreds of years ago, a monk in an ancient monastery is copying a manuscript of the New Testament. He finally comes to the passage where Jesus shares our Lord's Prayer. Word by word, he copies it. "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." He copied that, and it was the end. That is where the Lord's Prayer ends. All scholars will tell you that "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory" was never in the original Lord's Prayer. It was added later. It ends with, "...lead us not in temptation, but deliver us from evil"—the end.

In our story, the monk who is transcribing the text is suddenly captivated by the energy and meaning of that prayer. Everything that it says catapults him into another state that reflects such oneness and love, and he feels the presence of the Divine. It's almost as if he's gone into a mystical trance of high proportions. He begins to suddenly state out loud, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." And then he says it again, only louder, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Something takes over in him and he writes it in the margin. Years later, another scribe comes along and sees it and incorporates it into the body of the text. Now it's in the prayer forever. Over and over again he said, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory." It came from somewhere, from somebody who felt that sacred something that moves from within.

In Unity we teach that there is one presence and one power—God, the good—everywhere present. Once you make a connection to that presence—once that energy is embraced, released, and felt—you become something more than you ever were before. You can't go back on it. It's a seed that had been planted in the framework of your consciousness. It is a plus that has been added to your consciousness and to your experience of life. We become more of a plus in the world because of it. It's not an easy thing to get to that place. Many are not there. Many are in fluctuation between being able to embrace that. Some fluctuate between pluses and minuses, because our lives have both pluses and minuses in them. Therefore, one must learn to separate the experiences from the experiencer. There's a part of you that's observing and is separated from the experience you're going through.

I was reading some writings of Howard Thurman, who is recognized as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's foremost religious leaders. He died in 1981. He was an African American man who was born in a Florida town in 1900, when the south was still very segregated. He went on from there to lecture and teach at over 500 institutions around the world. He wrote more than 20 books on spiritual discovery and inspiration. He served as the dean of rank and chapel, as well as professor of theology at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He was the minister and co-founder of an inter-denominational church in San Francisco, which was the first fully integrated church in America. He was a great man and did a lot of great things.

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In one of his writings he reflected on a time when he was out on the ocean. It was a moonlit night, and he looked out his cabin window and reflected on the ghosts of his ancestors who had traveled across those same waters many years ago as slaves. But they had traveled in the deep, heavy darkness of a foul-smelling hold of a ship where they could see no sky and hear no night sounds. They were probably caught up in the feelings of agony and despair regarding their circumstances. Thurman wondered what tools of the spirit were in their hands with which to cut through those fears and that despair that they must have been feeling. Perhaps the wish was that death of the body would come before death of the soul, because the soul was so challenged based on what was being experienced externally. He wondered how they endured.

As you know, a slave was not seen as a person, but as a thing—a commodity. They were challenged with their senses of identity. It was a time of great moral darkness in our history. Thurman doesn't address it from a standpoint of anger or disgust, and he doesn't try to bring the past up for retribution. He reflects on the strength and endurance of the spirit that was called upon by these people, much like we would reflect on the people who went through the Holocaust.

He makes brief mention of the kinds of things they had to face and deal with. It was quite common for husbands to be sold and separated from wives or for children to be separated from their parents. There was an enormous attack on any sense of home and family. Wives were at the mercy of the lusts of the masters while the husbands were there and couldn't do anything to intervene; if they did they would be killed.

Like Habakkuk, in the Old Testament, Mr. Thurman raises the question, "What does one do?" Like anyone faced with hardships, he says there are several alternatives that one has. He says one of the alternatives is that one can become mean. We've seen people who do that. They seem to have a fierce grudge against life, churning with vengeance. They penalize everything else they touch and trust no one. They even may become cruel themselves, out of a need to settle a score with life. They have nothing to lose, because they have essentially lost everything.

Another alternative is to withdraw into themselves—build a wall around themselves and let no one penetrate in. There's a serious detachment from life and others. They're not happy or unhappy. They're indifferent—left in a cold, dark, distant stare. No spark is left. They may even show up as having an aggressive cynicism or bold defiance toward life.

The final alternative he shared is more creative. He said that one could think of it as getting a second wind, like a runner. It requires the exercise of great and dynamic will. You have to be able to generate and direct your will to the deepest that is in you. It's the will that is able to take an appraisal of the circumstances you're facing, to see them clearly, and to understand them. Despite the facts that they reveal, hope continues. That hope continues against all odds and all of the evidence that you take in. He says that it is a complete and final refusal to be stopped. Howard Thurman writes, "There is a bottomless resourcefulness in man that ultimately enables him to transform the spear of frustration into a shaft of light. This is God in man. Because of it,

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man stands in immediately candidacy for the power to absorb all of the pain of life without destroying the soul—without destroying even a dimension within them where joy lives.”

The slaves sang songs and spirituals. Within the lyrics were the affirmations and messages that kept them going. It was one dimension of a way to cope. Thurman talked about the universal analogy or insight where life is a river. Many of the songs were about rivers. The nature of a river is to flow, and it’s always moving and on it’s way. As a philosopher said, you never could bathe in the same river twice, because the river is constantly moving. That’s the river of life.

Langston Hughes wrote a book, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, in 1926. It was a collection of Negro poems and songs. One was called “Deep River,” and it went like this:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
went down to New Orleans.  
And I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers—ancient, dusky rivers.  
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

It’s an idea that we can all learn from: the ability to have our souls grow deep like the rivers from the experiences we go through.

Howard Thurman goes on to develop this idea about life as a river. He stresses that our life represents an essential process. No single experience, however great or big, is able to represent us adequately. Life is essentially dynamic and alive, and you’re able to move beyond experiences, no matter how big or devastating they may be. He says, “All experience is the raw material that goes into the making of you and me.” All of us have to have experiences. They’re not going to be all good. Sometimes those that are difficult are the very material that make us go deep into the river. He suggests that we think of life as the river, and you and me, as individuals, as the bank of the river—the bank that holds the river in. Life is the river, but you and I are the bank. All experiences leave their mark. The bank gives itself to the river that moves through it. At the river’s delta, a shovelful of sand will reveal the essence of your story.

He talks about Tennyson, who talked about the river as well. He said, “I am a part of all that I have met, yet all experience is an arch wherethrough gleams that untraveled land whose margin fades forever when I move.” The idea is that there’s a river of life with times of drought and times of flood. Dry times would occur when there is a lack of rainfall. The banks that had been

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covered by the river now stand revealed and exposed. We can have those experiences, and life can be like that. There are also times of dryness in life, when everything seems to be at low tide and going wrong. There is a loss of enthusiasm, nothing seems to matter, and there is a dryness of the spirit that seems to take over at times like that. There is a drought of the soul. Even sometimes, after a burst of energy on a particular project, there is also a falling back. The idea of the drought can be seasonal, or it can be related to a circumstance. It's important to understand the cause of it and realize that there are special reserves you can tap into from within that give you new life-giving currents. They're always there.

Then there are flood times when everything is flowing along wonderfully. You have life's comforts, your health is good, you feel secure, and your prosperity is good. All of a sudden, along comes a flood. It might be the death of a loved one, a serious illness, the loss of a job, something with a relationship, or all of them hitting at once. You have no idea the kinds of things people have come to me with, as a minister—major floods and many things hitting at once. Thurman points out that the answer to the flood time is that the river is becoming a greater opening to the sea. It widens its banks. The sea is the answer, he says, both at times of drought and flood.

The river has a goal, which is the sea. The river is ever on its way to the sea, whose far off call is heard by all waters. All of the waters of the earth are en route to the sea. Nothing can keep them from getting there. There may be dams and disturbances in the earth that throw the river off course, but it will cut a new channel and find its way to that sea. Our lives may have twists and turns. We may get frustrated or stumble over some rocks, but at last, the river has to answer to the call of the sea. Thurman states, "That out of which the river comes is that into which the river goes." The goal and the source of the river are the same. He says, "From morning dew to torrential downpour, from simple creek to mighty river, the source and the goal are the same." It's the sea. Life is like that. The goal of life is God. The source of life is God. That out of which life comes is that into which life goes. He out of whom life comes is he into whom life goes. God is the goal of man's life.

There is current to your life that is always there, even when circumstances seem to hide it. Your experiences of life are the raw material, but you are the experienter. The experienter always survives. He doesn't lose his soul in the experience. He goes deeper into the river. We can be like the monk in the experience of copying the manuscript of the Lord's Prayer. Something from deep within the currents of the river of life burst forth with a waterfall of words from deep within our soul that says, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." No matter what I face, no matter how heavy, no matter how great the burden, no matter how dark, thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. God bless.