

## The New Being by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. The New Being was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1955. This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted & Winnie Brock.

### Chapter 7: Principalities and Powers

*For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

ROMANS 8:38-39.

These words are among the most powerful ever written. Their sound is able to grasp human souls in desperate situations. In my own experience they have proved to be stronger than the sound of exploding shells, of weeping at open graves, of the sighs of the sick, of the moaning of the dying. They are stronger than the self-accusation of those who are in despair about themselves and they prevail over the permanent whisper of anxiety in the depth of our being. What is it that makes these words so powerful?

It is not their literal meaning, for in many respects that is strange to us. The angels and principalities, the height and depth, and even life and death point to the constellations of the stars which, according to ancient beliefs, determine the fate of man and history. Men are in their power, driven by fear and fighting for courage, sometimes victorious, more often defeated. This was the predicament of the men to whom Paul was speaking. Several times in his letters he sums up the meaning of Christianity in the message that Christ has conquered these powers which govern the world, but nowhere does he affirm it as triumphantly as in the beautiful and powerful words to the Romans.

If these words have power over our souls in our time, they must say something which we feel to be true, even if we do not share the ancient belief in the stars and their constellations. They name the powers in whose bondage we all are and with us all men in all periods of history, and the whole of creation. And they show us that which can give us the certainty that these powers do not prevail against us, that they are conquered and that we can participate in the victory over them.

Who, in recent years, and indeed in our whole century, does not feel the irresistible forces which determine our historical and personal destiny? They drive nations and individuals into insoluble conflicts, internal and external; into arrogance and insanity, into revolt and despair, into inhumanity and self-destruction. Each of us is involved in these conflicts and driven to a greater or lesser degree by these forces. The personal life of

each of us is in some way determined by them. No security is guaranteed to anyone; no house, no work, no friend, no family, no country anywhere in the world is safe, no plans are certain of fulfillment, all hopes are threatened. This is not a new state of things in human history. But what is new is that during a few years of comparative safety, we had forgotten that this is the true state of things. Now we see it again everywhere because suddenly we are living in its midst in every part of the earth.

Driven by the forces of fate, we ask the question mankind has always asked: What lies behind all this; what is its meaning; how can we endure it?

Long before the Christian era people spoke of the divine providence at work behind the driving forces of life and history. And in Christianity the words of Jesus about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and his command not to be anxious about tomorrow, have strengthened the faith in providence. It became the most common belief of Christian people. It gave them courage in danger, consolation in sorrow, hope among ruins. But more and more this faith lost its depth. It became a matter-of-course and was deprived of the overwhelming, surprising and triumphant character it has in the words of Paul.

When the German soldiers went into the First World War most of them shared the popular belief in a nice God who would make everything work out for the best. Actually, everything worked out for the worst, for the nation and for almost everyone in it. In the trenches of the war, the popular belief in personal providence was gradually broken and in the fifth year of war nothing was left of it. During and after the Second World War similar developments took place in this country. In the political tensions and fears of the last decade the belief in historical providence also broke down. The confidence, shared by large groups in this country, that in history everything will eventually turn out for the best, has almost disappeared. Today not much of it is left.

Neither the personal nor the historical belief in providence had depth or a real foundation. These beliefs were products of wishful thinking and not of faith. Faith in providence is not a *part* of the Christian faith—a part which is easier to grasp than the other parts. It is not the case, as an old country parson once told me, that people firmly believe in divine providence, but that the higher contents of the Christian faith, sin and salvation, Christ and the Church, are strange to them. If this is so, then the meaning of providence must also be strange to them and their belief in it is due to break down as such beliefs have in the storms of our century. *Faith in providence is faith altogether.* It is the courage to say yes to one's own life and life in general, in spite of the driving forces of fate, in spite of the insecurities of daily existence, in spite of the catastrophes of existence and the breakdown of meaning.

It is of such courage that Paul speaks in our text. But first he speaks of the powers which try to make this courage impossible. What do these powers do? They separate us from the love of God. This sentence is surprising. We would point to the dangers of pain and death which threaten our life day by day. Paul is certainly not unaware of them. He enumerates them as "tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or the sword." But he feels himself to be a conqueror of them all. And then he starts again and names the powers which threaten to separate us from the love of God. There is something mysterious about these powers. They do not have evil names like those which Paul has previously listed; most of them have glorious names—"angels," "principalities," "life" and "height." Why are they the ones which are most threatening? It is because they are always at work in every moment of our lives and because they have a double face. They are the powers which rule the world and they rule it for good and for evil. They grasp us by the good they bring and they destroy us by the evil they contain. This is the reason that they are more dangerous than the obvious evils. This is the reason that the triumph over them is the ultimate test which proves that Jesus is the Christ, the bringer of the new state of things.

Let us look into their nature, not as if they were strangers to us but as the driving powers of our own being. "Angels and principalities" are the names of some of them. Both of these words point to the same reality, a

reality which has little in common with the nice winged babies who appear in most popular pictures of angels. They point to realities which are simultaneously both glorious and terrible; realities full of beauty and full of destructiveness. What are these realities? We do not have to look far to discover them. They are in all of us, in our own families, in our own nation, in our world. By what signs do we recognize them? By a mixture of irresistible fascination and unconquerable anxiety. The name of one of these powers with an angelic face is love. The poetry of all languages abounds in the praise of this principality ruling over the life of all men. Its angelic face appears in pictures and statues, its angelic beauty sounds through music, its divine fascination is expressed in the figures of pagan gods and goddesses. And at the same time, all works of art, and all myths are full of the tragic and deadly works of the angel of love. Fascination and fear, joy and guilt, creation and destruction are united in this great ruler of our lives. And both the joy and the anxiety of love tend to separate us from the love of God; the one by attracting us away from God to itself, the other by throwing us into the darkness of despair in which we cannot see God any longer.

Another principality, angelic and demonic at the same time, is power. It has the severe manly beauty which we see in some pictures of the great archangels. It is itself a great angel, good and evil, just as love is a mighty principality, and it is the builder and protector of cities and nations, a creative force in every human enterprise, in every human community, in every human achievement. It is responsible for the conquest of nature, the organization of states, the execution of justice. Its mighty ally is another angelic figure, good and evil, namely, knowledge. We are all in their bondage. World history is the realm in which the reign of the angel of power is most manifest in all its glory and in all its tragedy. There is no need to say more about it to the people of our time. Every morning brings us news about this ruler of our world. And we all are grasped both by the angelic fascination of its creativity and by the demonic terror of its destructiveness in our personal lives as well as in the lives of our nations. And when power is allied with knowledge—a knowledge undreamed of ever before in the history of mankind—fascination as well as terror are infinitely increased. Both separate us from the love of God, the one driving us to the adoration of power and knowledge, the other driving us to cynicism and despair.

Paul mentions two other pairs of realities which may separate us from the love of God—"height and depth," and "things present and things to come." Everyone understands their meaning without guidance. But it is hard to exhaust the richness of this meaning. Height and depth are the highest and lowest points in the movements of the stars; they are the points of their greatest and least influence, for good and for evil. Height and depth are the moments in which a life process reaches its strongest realization, in vitality and success and power, and in which it reaches its weakest realization, perhaps its end. Height and depth are the moments of victory and defeat, of fulfillment and emptiness, of elevation and depression, of fascination and of anxiety. And both moments, height as well as depth, try to separate us from the love of God, the one by its light, the other by its darkness, both making God invisible.

"Things present and things to come"—the first points to the impact which the present makes upon us. It points to the seductive power of the present, to our refusal to look back or ahead when we are held in the grip of the acute enjoyment or the acute pain of the present moment. And "things to come" means the expectation of the new, the joy of the unexpected, the courage of the risk. But it also means the incalculable, the contingent, and the anxiety about the strange and unknown.

Let us close this enumeration with the pair of most threatening powers, with which Paul begins—"death and life." These two belong to each other. In every life death is always present; it works in body and soul from the moment of conception to the moment of dissolution. It is present at the beginning of our lives just as much as at their end. At the moment of our birth we begin to die, and we continue to do so daily, throughout our lives. Growth is death, because it undermines the conditions of life even while it is increasing life. But not to grow is immediate death. All of us stand between the fascination of life and the anxiety of death, and sometimes between the anxiety of life and the fascination of death. Death and life are the greatest, the all-embracing powers, which try to separate us from the love of God.

We have looked at the powers which rule the world and over which the faith in providence must triumph. What is this faith? It is certainly not the belief that everything will turn out well in the end. It is not the belief that everything follows a preconceived plan, whether we call the planner God or Nature or Fate. Life is not a machine well-constructed by its builder and running on according to the forces and laws of its own machinery. Life, personal and historical, is a creative and destructive process in which freedom and destiny, chance and necessity, responsibility and tragedy are mixed with each other in everything and in every moment. These tensions, ambiguities and conflicts make life what it is. They create the fascination and the horror of life. They drive us to the question of a courage which can accept life without being conquered by it, and this is the question of providence.

But let us now drop the word "providence" with all its false connotations and look at what it really means. It means the courage to accept life in the power of that which is more than life. Paul calls it the love of God. This love, certainly, is above the angelic-demonic figure of love of which we spoke. This love is the ultimate power of union, the ultimate victory over separation. Being united with it enables us to stand above life in the midst of life. It enables us to accept the double-faced rulers of life, their fascination and their anxiety, their glory and their horror. It gives us the certainty that no moment is possible in which we can be prevented from reaching the fulfillment towards which all life is striving. This is the courage to accept life in the power of that in which life is rooted and overcome.

And if you now ask how this is possible, we turn again to Paul's hymn and find there two answers. He concludes his list of the ruling powers with the words, . . . "nor anything else in all *creation*." The powers of this world are *creatures* as we are. They are no more than we, they are limited. We are united with that which is not creature and whose creative ground no creature can destroy; then we know they cannot destroy the *meaning* of our lives even if they can destroy our lives. And this gives us the certainty that no creature can destroy the meaning of life universal, in nature as well as history, of which we are a part, even though history and the whole universe should destroy themselves tomorrow. No creature can keep us from this ultimate courage. None? Perhaps one—ourselves. Against all the powers and principalities, including life and death, the courage to maintain the unity with God stands firm. But it falls when guilt separates us from the love of God. Then we cannot face death, because the sting of death is sin; we cannot face life because guilt drives life into tragic self-destruction; we cannot face love because love is corrupted by greed; and we cannot face power because it is corrupted by cruelty. We shy away from the past because it is polluted by guilt, and we shy away from the future because it may bring the fruits of past guilt, and we cannot rest in the present because it accuses us and expels us. We cannot stand the height because we are afraid of falling, and we cannot stand the depth because we feel responsible for our fall. The rulers of the world cannot achieve what an uneasy conscience can achieve—the undermining of our courage to accept life. Therefore, Paul's final message is: Not even your guilty conscience can separate you from the love of God. For the love of God means that God accepts him who knows that he is unacceptable. This is the meaning of Paul's closing words, in Christ Jesus our Lord." He is the victor over the rulers of the world because He is the victor over our hearts. His image gives us the certainty that even our hearts, our self-accusation, our despair about ourselves cannot separate us from the love of God, the ultimate unity, the source and ground of the courage to accept life.

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