



## Life Before God

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**I**n most of the world's religions, the concept of life with God translates itself mainly into being withdrawn from the ordinary world. Such a concept normally implies abandoning the things that characterize common life (like work, marriage and love, the pursuit of happiness, the acquisition of goods, etc.), and focusing on the inward religious life. As a result, monastic and ascetic life are usually understood to be the real, or at least the highest, experience of a life with God.

Judaism, however, has had a quite different understanding of what it means to live with God. Since biblical times, life with God was understood as to "live in the presence of God." Common life in an ordinary world should not be abandoned, but rather one should strive to fashion it to the holiness appropriate to God's presence.<sup>1</sup> Work, love, possessions, time, relationships, any and every aspect of life should be consecrated to God.

Not the search for an inward life but the experience of a life fashioned by God's will and commandments represented the real life with God.

Historically, Christianity, in a very early stage, adopted the concept of the inward religious life as the true life with God.<sup>2</sup> It became henceforth the most common and influential understanding in Christian circles, even among those Christians who do not promote monasticism and asceticism as the ideal Christian life.

The New Testament's concept of life with God, nevertheless, stands quite opposite to this widespread inward understanding. According to the ancient Jewish understanding, the New Testament focuses on the consecrated "living before God" as the real expression of life with God. Indeed, the expression before God punctuates many New Testament passages that illustrate well what a life with God is. In Luke 1:6, for example, Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, are presented as "righteous before God,

living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord."<sup>3</sup> For many followers of Yeshua, He was perceived as "a prophet mighty in word and deeds before God" (Luke 24:19). The pious and righteous life of Cornelius, a gentile, came as "a memorial before God" (Acts 10:4), and his willingness to stand "before God" and hear His word showed to Peter and the other Jewish believers that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:33-34). Paul, addressing the members of the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) of his time, said, "Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day" (Acts 23:1). In his letters, Paul made clear what it meant for him to live "in good conscience before God." In Romans 2:13, he argues that "it is not the hearers of the law that are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified." In his letters to the believers in Thessalonica, he

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prayed in their favor saying “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts without unblamable in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:13). He exhorted his young coworker, Timothy, who had observed his teachings, conduct, aim in life, faith, patience, love, steadfastness, persecutions, and sufferings, to live a godly life in the Messiah. Such a life indeed was to continue to live in what he had learned since childhood, a life according to the Holy Scriptures. These Holy Writings were able to instruct him to salvation in the Messiah Yeshua, for “all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). In the light of this statement, Paul charged Timothy, “before God and the Messiah Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead,” to be a faithful minister (2 Timothy 4:1-5). James, one of the main pillars of the incipient Christian Community, and the head of the Jewish Christian community of Jerusalem at the time, addressed his letter to all the believers, saying that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27).

“To live before God” is also “to live to God” (Romans 6:10; 14:7-8). This implies not the forsaking of the things common to human life but the abandoning of sin, of wickedness. The believer in the Messiah is called upon to walk in newness of life, in a life of obedience to God

that leads to righteousness for sanctification (Roman 6:2-19; 1 Peter 2:24). Every aspect of a believer’s life should be lived for the glory of God (“so whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”—1 Corinthians 10:31). This kind of life is also called “the life by God,” the “life by the Messiah” (John 6:57), or the “life by the power of God” (2 Corinthians 13:4). It is also “the life in the Spirit” or “by the Spirit” (Romans 8; Galatians 5:25; 1 Peter 4:6).

The idea of life in God, or in the Messiah, or by the power of God, or by or in the Spirit (in Hebrew, the Ruah) reflects a Jewish concept

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quite common by the time of Paul and the first Christians, usually known as the doctrine of the “Two Ways” or the “Two Spirits,” or also the “Two Masters.” Accordingly, there are only two ways in life open before a human being: one that leads to death and the other to life (Matthew 7:13-14; compare Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Each way is related to one “Master” that the individual must choose to serve. One is his own evil inclination (the *yetser*), “the spirit of flesh,” the “spirit of defilement” that rules over him. The other is God (the *Yotser*: “the Creator”). One cannot serve both; he must choose one and put the other to “anger.” In serving God, man angers his evil inclination and puts it to death. The man who serves God lives by His Spirit, and is led

by Him to a life in accordance with His laws and will.<sup>4</sup>

According to Romans 8, the “Spirit of life in the Messiah” implies the fulfillment of God’s just requirements of the law in one’s life (vs. 4). Those who walk according to the Spirit have their mind on the things of the Spirit, and this results in *Hay*, life, and *Shalom*, peace (vss. 5-6). The life in the Spirit leads to a “Child and Father” relationship with God, and one can therefore cry “Abba, Father!” (vs. 15). As a child of God, he or she becomes God’s heir and fellow heir with the Messiah, with whom he or she will be glorified (vs. 17).

New Testament passages like Matthew 5-7; Romans 12-15; Galatians 5:16-6:10; Ephesians 4:17-6:9; Philippians 1:27-2:18; 3:17-4:9; Colossians 3:1-4:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:16, etc., make very practical applications of what it means to live “in the Spirit,” to “live with God.” Faithful to its Scriptural and Jewish roots, life with God in the New Testament is not a sad, self-mortifying kind of “half-life.” It is rather “fullness of life,” it is “LIFE” in uppercase, as Yeshua Himself said: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Green, “Introduction,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible to the Middle Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), xiii-xiv.

<sup>2</sup>Especially from the third century C. E. onwards; see Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, vol. 1 (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1991), 201-206.

<sup>3</sup>All biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

<sup>4</sup>See the study on the Jewish doctrine of the “Two Ways” in Joseph Shulam, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1997), 209-290.