

Service, Joy and Sacrifice

An Essay on Commentaries by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

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Abstract

Throughout the many talks that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave in His epic journey to the west on 1912, He consistently interspersed the subjects of service and sacrifice. These presuppose basic choices that must be made in changing purpose from self interest to sharing. Moreover, such sharing and service must reach beyond an individual’s ‘comfort zone’ to have any significance. This essay deals with barriers to such change and with the unexpected but uplifting rewards that follow. It further emphasizes the fact of our spiritual nature and the challenge we face in recognizing that fact. The subjects of choice, levels of sacrifice, tests, difficulties and ultimate sacrifice are compared with respect to the priority of service to God and man. In the process of shifting a personal paradigm from self-interest to concern for others, one will often experience spiritual transformation. Within this context, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides a supreme example of a life of service to God and to humankind. He expounds upon the meaning of suffering and the mystery of sacrifice. We will examine ever-deepening levels of this subject with the purpose of ascertaining why it is so important to human life.

Barriers to Faith

One of the common barriers to accepting religious faith is the notion that one must experience sacrifice, pain and suffering while traversing a spiritual path. Sometimes the question is asked “why would our Creator allow His chosen Messengers to experience extreme punishment for the sake of bringing His cause to His creatures?” Or “why would a kind, loving, Heavenly Father permit a Holocaust that would wipe out half of the Jewish population?” Some truly concerned individuals ask “what about all the innocent

babes that have starved to death in times of plenty?” Or “why would God allow over thirteen million children to be left bereft of parents due to the AIDS epidemic in a small country like Uganda?” Of course it’s easy to establish the lines of cause and effect in human crises and to point fingers of blame. Yet to a secularist these questions are simply associated with specific patterns within a bigger picture. In other words “that’s just the way life is – ‘survival of the fittest,’ so there is nothing to gain by worrying over it.” Yet there is a lingering question that even an atheist might ask; what kind of plan would allow such anomalies in

human suffering whether natural or spiritual? Finally, why has religious martyrdom taken on such great significance in the life of man?

Choices

These questions are answered in a most elegant fashion by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and in the process He opens up a reality that has lain dormant for many centuries in the vast majority of the people of the world: the reality of the soul. In one of His tablets He stresses that "man should sacrifice all of his conditions for the divine station of God."¹ He further defines the station of God as "mercy, kindness, forgiveness, sacrifice, favour, grace and giving-life to the spirits and lighting the fire of His love in the hearts and arteries."² From this it is inferred that the spiritual sickness of the world of man is inherently anchored to the material side of life. If we disregard our spiritual nature then the worst kind of catastrophe is not only possible but also very probable.

In *Paris Talks* 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the importance of meditation as a means of speaking with the spirit and states: "You cannot apply the name 'man' to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal, lower than the beasts."³ Here He is taking us out of the primitive realm of consciousness and is drawing us into the realm of the spirit of faith. In *Star of The West* He describes faith:

Faith outwardly means to believe in the message a Manifestation brings to the world and accept the

*fulfillment in him of that which the prophets have announced. But in reality faith embodies three degrees: to confess with the tongue; to believe in the heart; to show forth in our actions. These three things are essential to true faith. The important requirement is the love of God in the heart . . . By our actions we reveal what is growing in the heart. Actions are mirrors of the soul . . . Faith is not so much what we believe as what we carry out . . . Man must prove whatsoever he speaketh by deeds and actions.*⁴

Unfortunately, the very thing that gives us our greatest strength, our rational capacity, which enables one to reflect 'the image of God,' can be our 'Achilles heel'—our most vulnerable feature when we make the wrong choices. The creative, imaginative capacity of modern man can become addicted to purely material pleasures and in that state may fall victim to 'Satanic fancies' with gross results. Our intelligence can magnify emotions and instincts far beyond normal animal behavior. When this is expanded to groups, cultures and governments, the most horrendous acts can be perpetrated on innocent people. Events of the 20th Century confirmed this on a massive scale over and over again. Man alone causes such acts and to blame God for human transgressions is to utterly disregard the endless efforts by His Prophets to aid humankind in a multitude of ways with guidance, inspiration and, yes, sacrifice. In other words, to question why God would allow suffering of the innocent or of His Messengers is to put

things in reverse order. The question should be: Why do we do things that not only damage our own character but, at the same time, hurt the very ones we love the most? How can we blame God for our own acts when He has gone to such great lengths to help us by sending His Messengers to reveal His laws, all for our benefit? How can we point the finger of blame to others or to God when we support and embrace acts of corrupt leaders?

The real tragedy of modern life is that men and women seem to deny the most important aspect of their being: the existence of a spiritual life. Modern research indicates that the brain has a special zone for processing mystical thoughts.⁵ From this we must assume that the evolutionary process of human development must have included spiritual awareness early on. So when Bahá'u'lláh tells us that we are 'created noble'⁶ He is including a physical support system that can sustain spiritual development. But there is another aspect of our being that is relegated to the spiritual life which is truly mysterious, and that is the altruistic capacity that humans fulfill in acts for the benefit of others without expectation of reward. Often in situations of crisis, certain individuals will unexpectedly raise themselves to heroic levels of performance in helping their fellow human beings. No greater example of this has occurred in modern times than the catastrophe of September 11, 2001 in "The City of The Covenant" with the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. This event awoke the latent generosity and compassion of the American people as

never before. The examples of heroism within the ranks of firemen, police and civil servants stands unprecedented in times of peace. Something unexpected and uplifting happens to those who experience sacrifice and service for the benefit of others. This is a form of proof that the veracity of human spiritual capacity is very real, even when we may not be fully aware of that capacity.

It is with regard to this spiritual capacity that 'Abdu'l-bahá guides us to a deeper understanding of our own nature. He states:

It is an axiomatic fact that while you meditate you are speaking with your own spirit. In that state of mind you put certain questions to your spirit and the spirit answers: the light breaks forth and the reality is revealed.⁷

The recognition of this reality is actually a first step on the path of service to the Creator and to our fellow human beings. In the meditative state we become detached from physical wants so much so that what once seemed difficult to give up becomes unimportant while sacrifice to serve becomes an inner source of happiness free of external influences. In other words, in this manner, if we choose, we can pluck the heart-strings of the soul and a whole new world will open up.

Levels of Sacrifice

At a meeting at New York during His trip through the United States in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá described four levels of significance related to sacrifice. He also discussed two kinds of sacrifice that

apply to these four levels, one physical and the other spiritual that are interrelated. In this instance He was speaking to Christians.

The first significance of sacrifice that 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounds upon is exemplified by the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And He states categorically that Christ willingly sacrificed Himself for our sake. He was depicted as knowing, from the beginning of His ministry, that he would face great tribulations in the course of His teaching. He was aware of the dangers in speaking out in opposition to existing governments and cultures and how they would rise against Him. Knowing full well that eventually His blood would be shed and His body broken, He did not hesitate to proclaim His message.⁸

The degree of pain and suffering associated with crucifixion must not be confused with mere dying even of a violent kind. The Phoenicians reputedly invented this excruciating form of execution long ago as the most effective deterrent to theft. Theirs was a sea-bound empire that could not rely on land-based law in primitive times. Anyone with thoughts of piracy or theft would be profoundly discouraged to commit crime after seeing a hapless victim hanging on a cross in public view. It was not just the pain of supporting ones weight on the nails in hands and feet that one had to endure, it was the difficulty in breathing that made it so intolerable. The punishment would last for hours on end while the prisoner would starve for air. In agony he would lift his weight on his nailed feet just to

be able to relax the ribcage so to breath a gulp of precious air only to sink once again in exhaustion and pain. No ordinary human being would ever willingly submit to such torture. Yet, Christ did so out of His love for mankind. It is the reality of this love that inspires this ultimate form of sacrifice.⁹ Thus the first level of sacrifice involved the destruction of the physical self.

The second meaning of sacrifice relates to one of Christ's sayings: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."¹⁰ Confusion exists between literal and spiritual interpretations among various churches regarding this quote. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies this:

It was not the body of Christ that came from heaven. His body came from the womb of Mary, but the Christly perfections descended from heaven; the reality of Christ came down from heaven. The Spirit of Christ and not the body descended from heaven. Consequently, by saying He was the bread that came from heaven He meant that the perfections which He showed forth were divine perfections, that the blessings within Him were heavenly gifts and bestowals, that His light was the light of Reality.¹¹

He further rectifies this notion about living forever as being essentially spiritual, one that assimilates the divine Perfections that are within Christ. Thus, by recognizing the spiritual significance

of Christ's great sacrifice the believer acquires attributes that open the door to eternal spiritual life. This second level of sacrifice then is related to assimilation of spiritual attributes and the capacity to share them with others.¹²

For the third meaning of sacrifice, 'Abdu'l-Bahá draws upon the imagery of a small seed that has been planted in the ground. As the seed breaks open for the first tiny root to grow followed quickly by its first shoot, it physically sacrifices itself so that the tree may grow into a giant plant. But the potential of that seed will be expressed in the beauty of a fully-grown tree. Without the sacrifice of the seed, the tree could not grow. By comparing Christ to the seed, a powerful metaphor is expressed for the birth of Christianity.

*Christ outwardly disappeared. His personal identity became hidden from the eyes, even as the identity of the seed disappeared; but the bounties, divine qualities and perfections of Christ became manifest in the Christian community which Christ founded through sacrificing Himself.*¹³

'Abdu'l-Bahá then describes how the potential of the seed is realized through the growth of branches, twigs, blossoms and fruits that define the maturity of the tree just as the teachings of Christ result in the maturity of the Christian community. Without the seed the tree could not have come into existence.¹⁴ The third level of sacrifice thus embodies the transformation of one positive reality into another.

The fourth level of sacrifice is based on a principle that at first sounds mysterious. It is described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a reality that "sacrifices its own characteristics"! It sounds like some form of annihilation yet it becomes the exact opposite in the light of true understanding. When we cling to the world of nature we are inevitably caught up in a maelstrom of self-destructive influences. In spite of what might appear on the surface to be good in the phenomenal world, there exist disparaging conditions of corruption, death, ambition, avarice, self worship, egotism, bloodthirstiness, animalism, ferocity, darkness and evil passion. These are characteristics that must be sacrificed in order to replace them with divine attributes.¹⁵ He explains how this may be done:

*On the other hand, man must acquire heavenly qualities and attain divine attributes. He must become the image and likeness of God. He must seek the bounty of the eternal, become the manifestor of the love of God, the light of guidance, the tree of life and the depository of the bounties of God. That is to say, man must sacrifice the qualities and attributes of the world of nature for the qualities and attributes of the world of God.*¹⁶

In this respect, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes an ingot of iron in its raw state as symbolizing the attributes of the human world with its qualities of solidity, coldness and blackness. These features are concealed and disappear when the iron is cast into a forge. It then takes on the

qualities of the fire that become visibly apparent with its color, its fluidity and heat. The iron becomes something different when it takes on these new qualities that may be said to symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom. So it happens when man becomes detached from human imperfections, from earthly bonds and from the darkness of the animal world, he enters a "realm of the unbounded" and partakes of the unseen world with divine virtues. He becomes something different, he becomes a "sacrificial lover of the Sun of Truth."¹⁷

What appears to be our strength in the world of nature is actually imperfection with respect to the spiritual life. Human beings are the only earthly creatures capable of sacrificing these tendencies for the sake of acquiring heavenly qualities. This is no doubt part of our evolutionary growth toward achieving an ever-higher state of existence but this can only be achieved through divine assistance. It is there for us to reject or accept and we must accept this assistance if the destiny of man is to be fulfilled. 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts this issue of sacrifice in perfect perspective:

*Every man trained through the teachings of God and illumined by the light of His guidance, who becomes a believer in God and His signs and is enkindled with the fire of the love of God, sacrifices the imperfections of nature for the sake of divine perfections. Consequently, every perfect person, every illumined, heavenly individual stands in the station of sacrifice.*¹⁸

Thence, the fourth level of sacrifice involves detaching one's self from negative material values in favor of positive spiritual attributes and thereby becoming a new being.

Beyond Tests and Difficulties

No one wants to hear about pain and suffering because every creature experiences them in varying degrees. Whether it is for altruistic reasons or for mere survival, suffering is an ever-present fact of material life. But when pain or suffering is endured for a higher cause it takes on a special significance especially in matters of the spirit.

The mystery of sacrifice is a profound one, requiring detailed explanation. But briefly it may be stated that sacrificial love is the love shown by the moth towards the candle, by the parched wayfarer towards the living fountain, by the true lover towards his beloved, by the yearning heart towards the goal of its desire.¹⁹

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains further that grief and sorrow are part of a divine plan. Without them we can not grow. He compares this to a farmer who ploughs a field for planting which ultimately manifests a rich harvest. Like the earth turned over by a plough we are transformed when we are chastened and thereby reveal a harvest of spiritual virtue in our own lives. He says, "It is clear, then, that tests and trials are, for sanctified souls, but God's bounty and grace, while to the weak, they are a calamity, unexpected and sudden."²⁰

No one suffered more than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did throughout His long life, both physically and mentally. Concurrently, enormous responsibility rested upon His shoulders in dealing with matters of the Cause of God. Threats on His life by covenant breakers were His constant companion. The early years in Akka brought severe distress to the companions of Bahá’u’lláh while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá bore the brunt of it. Through it all He laid out the Divine Plan for spreading the Faith around the world, wrote many tablets and revealed prayers of great potency. And most amazing, while under constant demoralizing pressure, He expressed radiant happiness to all who had the good fortune to meet Him.

*This is the day of Bahá’u’lláh, the age of the Blessed Perfection, the cycle of the Greatest Name. If you do not smile now, for what time will you await and what greater happiness could you expect?*²¹

He clarified His own dilemma:

*Grieve not because of my imprisonment and calamity; for this prison is my beautiful garden, my mansioned paradise, and my throne of dominion among mankind. My calamity in my prison is a crown to me in which I glory among the righteous.*²²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá once spoke about His imprisonment when addressing friends from the west:

We are glad, oh! so full of gladness that you are free, freedom is not a matter of place, but of condition. It was happy in that prison, for those days were passed

*in the path of service. To me prison was freedom. Troubles are a rest to me. Death is life. To be despised is honor. Therefore was I full of happiness all through that prison time. When one is released from the prison of self, that is indeed freedom! for self is the greatest prison. When this release takes place, one can never be imprisoned. Unless one accepts dire vicissitudes, not with dull resignation, but with radiant acquiescence, one cannot attain this freedom.*²³

Ultimate Sacrifice

It is inspiring that Divine messengers of God sacrifice Their very being for the love of man. Every effort, every word, every breath of Their existence is spent on behalf of humankind. Some, like Christ and the Báb, give Their lives quickly after a short but profound ministry. Others, like Moses and Bahá’u’lláh, extended this sacrificial process over a forty-year period. In every case, They gave Their all while enduring extreme tests and while revealing teachings that utterly changed the world.

It is also inspiring that men and women of faith in return gave their lives for the love of their Prophets. In each Dispensation large numbers of innocent souls have been martyred for their faith.

Of the apostles the most important martyrs were SS. Peter and Paul, both put to death at Rome. Clement of Rome describes them as God’s athletes, contending for the heavenly prize, and mentions a “great multitude” executed at the

same time. Early in the 2nd century, Ignatius of Antioch described his own prospective martyrdom as a way of "attaining to God" and urged the Roman Christians not to make any effort to have him spared.²⁴

The early centuries of the Christian era were particularly gruesome. In 64 A.D., Nero, the Roman emperor who had murdered his own mother in year 59, "sought to recover his popularity with the mob by illuminating his gardens with a public display of burning Christians; on the pretense that those incomprehensible and therefore formidable Jewish fanatics had set fire to Rome."²⁵ Sacrificial festivals presented by some Roman Emperors in the Coliseum for the amusement of the populace involved voracious ingestion of live Christians by hungry lions. Reputedly, the guards would slash the skin covering the abdomens of hapless victims so that bleeding would increase the ferocity of the beasts.

The greatest religious martyrdom in history occurred during the early years of the Bahá'í Era in which some twenty thousand of the faithful refused to recant their faith. The cruelty and violence were almost indescribable. Not only did this occur in public view, the authorities ingeniously involved the people themselves in perpetrating endless atrocities against innocent followers of the Báb and later of Bahá'u'lláh. One of the outstanding heroes of the many uprisings against the Bábís was Váhid during the upheaval of Nayríz. After resisting a long siege against impossible

odds He and his companions were captured and arrested under sentence of death. Nabil describes these events in *The Dawn Breakers*:

In their eagerness to carry out the suggestion of 'Abbás-Qulí Khán, these men snatched the turban from the head of Váhid, wound it around his neck, and, binding him to a horse, dragged him ignominiously through the streets. . . . The women of Nayríz, stirred to the highest pitch of excitement by the shouts of triumph which a murderous enemy was raising, pressed from every side around the corpse, and, to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals gave free vent to their feelings of unrestrained fanaticism: They danced merrily around it, scornful of the words which Váhid, in the midst of his agony, had spoken, words which the Imám Ḥusayn, in a former age and in similar circumstances, had uttered: "Thou knowest, O my Beloved, that I have abandoned the world for Thy sake, and have placed my trust in Thee alone. I am impatient to hasten to Thee, for the beauty of Thy countenance has been unveiled to my eyes. Thou dost witness the evil designs which my wicked persecutor has cherished against me. Nay, never will I submit to his wishes or pledge my allegiance to him."²⁶

This quote explains as well as any can why early believers in a new faith of God express by their complete submission such profound love for the Divine Messenger Who brings the new Revelation. Nabil continues:

Thus was brought to an end a

noble and heroic life. . . . The extinction of that life was the signal for a fierce onslaught on the lives and property of those who had identified themselves with his Faith. No less than five thousand men were commissioned for that villainous task. The men were seized, chained, ill-treated, and eventually slaughtered. The women and children were captured and subjected to brutalities which no pen dare describe. Their property was confiscated, and their houses were destroyed. The fort of Khájih was burned to the ground. The majority of the men were first conducted in chains to Shiraz, and there, for the most part, suffered a cruel death. Those whom Zaynu'l-'Ábidín Khan, for purposes of personal benefit, had plunged into dark and subterranean dungeons were, as soon as his object had been achieved, delivered into the hands of his myrmidons, who perpetrated upon them acts of unspeakable cruelty. They were paraded at first through the streets of Nayríz, after which they were subjected to atrocious treatment in the hope of extracting from them whatever material advantage their persecutors had hitherto been unable to obtain. These having satisfied their greed, each victim was made to suffer an agonizing death. Every instrument of torture their executioners could devise was utilized to quench their thirst for revenge. They were branded, their nails were pulled out, their bodies were lashed, an incision was made in the nose through which a string was driven, nails were hammered into

their hands and feet, and in that piteous state each of them was dragged through the streets, an object of contempt and derision to all the people.²⁷

During the upheaval in Zanján, a formidable champion of the Cause of the Báb and one of the “ablest ecclesiastical dignitaries of his age,”²⁸ Ḥujjat-i-Zanjání, led the defenders of Fort Tabarsí. His companions resisted a long siege with incredible courage under his leadership. When they were at last overwhelmed, Ḥujjat succumbed to a bullet wound and was secretly buried because his companions did not want his remains to be mutilated. Ultimately they each suffered a cruel and barbaric death:

A number of these captives were blown from guns; others were stripped naked, ice-cold water was poured upon their bodies, and they were lashed severely. Still others were smeared with treacle and left to perish in the snow. Despite the shame and cruelties they were made to suffer, not one of these captives was known either to recant or to utter one angry word against his persecutors. Not even a whisper of discontent escaped their lips, nor did their countenances betray a shadow of regret or grief. No amount of adversity could succeed in darkening the light that shone in those faces; no words, however insulting, could disturb the serenity of their expressions.²⁹

The extreme acts of sacrifice by so many champions of the heroic age of the Bahá'í Dispensation make our own efforts seem pale by comparison. But

that should not deter anyone from service; contrarily the spirit of faith that those heroes expressed should inspire us all. Fortunately for this age, as Bahá'u'lláh explained in a tablet, "martyrdom is not confined to the shedding of blood." He advised the believers not to volunteer to give their lives. He "further ordained that teaching the Cause is as meritorious as dying for the Cause."³⁰ In other words, to die for the Cause when one is under coercion to recant one's faith may result in the highest honor. But to commit suicide in the hope of gaining such honor, especially at the cost of others, is utter waste and without reward.

Everyone can serve within his or her own capacity and to do so in the act of teaching is the most meritorious act they can perform in this life. One has only to talk to a pioneer of the Faith who has served far from home to get a glimpse of the joy and happiness that comes from this type of service, although it is far better to experience this for one's self. Yet a new believer may start out to teach with great enthusiasm only to become discouraged for lack of knowledge or experience. There were two things that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had to say about this when speaking to an early believer, Florence Khanum:

One was that He said to her . . . be patient, be as I am. The other was when some one expressed discouragement to Him, saying they could not possibly acquire all the qualities and virtues that Bahá'ís are directed to possess, and the Master replied . . . little by little;

day-by-day.³¹

The greatest example that we can follow is 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Servant of Bahá), the 'Master,' the 'Mystery of God,' the 'Most Great Branch,' 'The Exemplar,' 'Knight of the British Realm' and 'The Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant'. I often think of Him as the Great Sustainer of the Faith but all the accolades meant nothing to Him. He only wanted to be known as a servant to the Cause revealed by Bahá'u'lláh:

*'Abdu'l-Bahá is himself a servant at the Threshold of the Blessed Beauty and a manifestation of pure and utter servitude at the Threshold of the Almighty. He hath no other station or title, no other rank or power. This is my ultimate Purpose, my eternal Paradise, my holiest Temple and my Sadratu'l-Muntahá. . . .*³²

Sadratu'l-Muntahá refers to "The tree beyond which there is no passing." In the Bahá'í writings it is also a symbol of the Manifestation of God, specifically Bahá'u'lláh and is sometimes called the Divine or Sacred Lote Tree.³³ In clarifying His own station in response to the notion that He might be a Divine Manifestation in His own right, He unequivocally states in the light of service:

My qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. My praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem, and servitude to all the human race my perpetual religion. . . . No name, no title, no mention, no

commendation have I, nor will ever have, except ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory.”³⁴

In another place He further enlightens us about the real reasons for the difficulties that humans experience:

Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our own perfecting. While a man is happy he may forget his God; but when grief comes and sorrows overwhelm him, then will he remember his Father who is in Heaven, and who is able to deliver him from his humiliations. Men who suffer not, attain no perfection. The plant most pruned by the gardeners is that one which, when the summer comes, will have the most beautiful blossoms and the most abundant fruit. The laborer cuts up the earth with his plough, and from that earth comes the rich and plentiful harvest. The more a man is chastened, the greater is the harvest of spiritual virtues shown forth by him.³⁵

Regarding the transformational process, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has this to say:

These tests do but cleanse the spotting of self from off the mirror of the heart, till the Sun of Truth can cast its rays thereon; for there is no veil more obstructive than the self, and however tenuous that veil may be, at the last it will completely shut a person out, and deprive him of his portion of eternal grace.³⁶

We began this presentation by intro-

ducing four vital issues regarding human life. (1) It is a matter of choice for a person to remain totally self serving or altruistic. (2) Serving a cause must be significant to have real meaning. (3) Recognition of one’s spiritual nature is most effective in overcoming the natural resistance to serving selflessly. (4) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is exalted as a prime example, both by action and by wisdom of what the mystery of service, sacrifice and joy is all about.

We first addressed the barriers to faith that emerge when the idea of service is raised and how they increase with the requirement that sacrifice is essential to service. Also noted was the mystery of why God would allow the great suffering of Divine Messengers and how it might provoke another barrier. More barriers arise with the knowledge of the tragedies of human history that seem to overwhelm all the promises made by various revelations of the past. But the fate of barriers comes down to the choices made by man in every age. Our greatest strength of the rational mind becomes hampered by the limitations of natural existence in a material world. Thus our greatest challenge is to change this to a new paradigm for life on a higher level of the spirit.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides keys to that change through His numerous writings. First, He opens up a new reality that is spiritual, not just metaphysical but based on a profound Faith in a loving, providing Creator. All of the teachings that He received from His father Bahá’u’lláh over a forty-year period are expressed in warm human terms that touch the heart

of everyone that maintains an open mind. In this manner He takes us out of our primitive consciousness into the realm of the spirit. And it is the Spirit of Faith that sustains us on our future path in this world and the next. The Spirit of Faith is further reinforced by the obligation of prayer and the faculty of meditation. This, of course is true for all great religions. For, in spite of the difficulties of their times, many believers of the past have enhanced the progress of civilization in the age in which they lived. Now a new age is upon us and a deeper understanding of our spiritual destiny is urgent in light of the worldwide threats that we face.

Foremost among these threats is materialism and all of the secular limitations that go with it. One way to overcome this challenge is through service in a spirit of faith for it may open the door to spiritual transformation. But service involves sacrifice and, of the different levels of sacrifice described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there is one that every human being on earth can share. It has to do with the giving up of physical pre-occupations and the gaining of divine attributes. Through this process a sense of joy begins to replace the sense of loss regarding selfish desires. This is true because we are spiritual beings and until we recognize this that special sense of joy will elude us. The next step is to apply divine attributes in a path of service and this will bring an even deeper sense of happiness.

Mention was made of four levels of sacrifice identified by 'Abdu'l-Bahá

using Christ as the example. (1) Through His love for mankind He willingly sacrificed His physical self for our spiritual benefit. (2) By assimilating His spiritual attributes, the believer can attain eternal life at the highest level and then learn to sacrifice material resources in order to teach the great message related to His ultimate sacrifice. (3) Sacrifice embodies transformation of one reality for another such as a seed giving up its configuration for the growth of a plant or as Christ giving up His personal identity in order for His attributes to emerge in the growth of Christian Civilization. (4) One reality can sacrifice its own characteristics. That is, negative attributes such as corruption, bloodthirstiness, and evil passion must be replaced by divine attributes such as love, trustworthiness, reverence and kindness.

'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us that pain and suffering are with us in everyday life and that these may be utilized for our own growth. He states that this is in fact part of a divine plan that can result in a rich harvest of spiritual bounty. As to the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom it is apparent that it is the cause of spectacular growth in the early stages of a new Revelation. This is exemplified in the first three centuries of the Christian era and on an even greater scale in the heroic age of the Bahá'í Faith. In our time however, selfless teaching is considered to be the equivalent to martyrdom.

Conclusion

The loving nature of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that

comes through in His writings shall remain as a core example for all the servants of the Cause of God. He quickly shows us how to overcome the many barriers to faith by connecting us to the different levels of sacrifice that open the door to spiritual transformation. He carries us beyond tests and difficulties in a way that makes them seem increasingly unimportant. He points out that life's pain and suffering can indeed become stepping-stones to spiritual growth. "Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him."³⁷ He expresses one more thought worth keeping in mind:

*Until a being setteth his foot in the plane of sacrifice, he is bereft of every favour and grace; and this plane of sacrifice is the realm of dying to the self, that the radiance of the living God may then shine forth.*³⁸

Finally, it is indeed important for us to understand the real nature of sacrifice and why it seems to be so necessary in life, especially in its spiritual aspects. When this is fully grasped in light of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's insight we are left with two basic choices regarding the progress of the soul. They are simple but their rewards have endless consequences: (1) Do we choose to serve the cause of God and our fellow man with joy and purpose or (2) do we deny our spiritual reality with its responsibilities only to wander in an endless labyrinth of uncertainty? The choice is ours alone to make.

Epilogue

The early heroes of the Bahá'í Dispensation were not privy to the rich literature that is available to us in our time. Many were simple country folk who became spiritual giants. A few outstanding scholars of religion were intoxicated with the Faith and verbally conveyed its message to anyone who would listen. Miraculously the spirit expressed by the charismatic Báb, even while in prison, enthralled masses of seekers throughout Persia. After His tragic execution, the prophecy that He had earlier revealed regarding "He Whom God shall make manifest" in the year nine,³⁹ was fulfilled by Bahá'u'lláh the Supreme Manifestation of God. An echo of those enormous sacrifices was heard during the late 20th Century in Iran, the Cradle of the Faith, with the barbarous torture and execution of over two hundred innocent Bahá'í leaders.

Startling references are made to the heroic martyrs of the Faith in the Book of Revelation 6:9-6:11, 7:13-7:17 by St. John when he was describing his vision of the "end time." Confirmation of this may be found in *Selections from The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, page 15, paragraph 3.2. The term Lamb, the one sacrificed, applies to all the Manifestations of God in the times of their respective Dispensations. Thus, in the new cycle, "the Lamb," the one who would unseal the books as expressed by St. John is Bahá'u'lláh.

Notes

1. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, Vol. I, 65.
2. Ibid.
3. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 175.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Star of The West*, March 1917-June 1919, Vol VIII, 58.
5. Larsen and Witham, “Scientists and Religion in America,” *Scientific American*, September 1999, 92.
6. Baha’u’llah, *The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh*, Arabic 22.
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 174.
8. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 450.
9. Ibid.
10. St. John 6:51, Holy Bible, 1325-1326.
11. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 450.
12. Ibid., 450-451.
13. Ibid., 451.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 451-452.
17. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of the Master*, 35.
18. Ibid., 452.
19. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of the Master*, 44.
20. Ibid., 43.
21. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 210.
22. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of The Master*, 41.
23. Ibid., 42.
24. *Encyclopedia Britannica 2001*, Standard Edition CD, Martyr, Christianity.
25. Hammerton and Barnes, *The Illustrated World History*, 274.
26. Nabil-i-A‘zam, *The Dawn Breakers*, 494-495.

27. Ibid., 495-496.
28. Ibid., 529.
29. Ibid., 577.
30. Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahá’í Dictionary*, 147.
31. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Wisdom of The Master*, 76.
32. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 295.
33. Wendi Momen, *A Basic Bahá’í Dictionary*, 200.
34. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, 139.
35. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 50-51.
36. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 182.
37. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 178.
38. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, 76.
39. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 29.

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