

I Live, No Longer I

A Summary Review

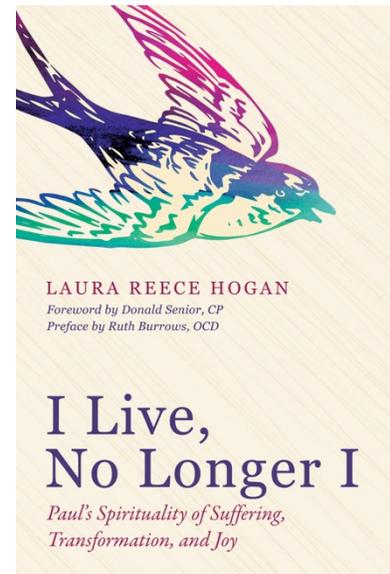
Having taught a class on [suffering and evil](#) recently, I'm always looking to expand my knowledge on topics that I will likely teach again. When I learned [Michael Gorman](#) recommended Laura Reece Hogan's book, *I Live, No Longer I: Paul's Spirituality of Suffering, Transformation, and Joy*, I quickly requested a review copy from the publisher. The title suggests a sweep through the Apostle's life focusing on that indefatigable joy he maintained, despite the harsh and cruel conditions under which he lived after becoming a Christ-follower. I'm always amazed and inspired, even dumbfounded, by Paul's ability to endure. Not only am I interested in learning more about Paul, I am most interested in learning *from* him. I want to take on his mind and heart for Christ and, however gradual, grow in my devotion to Christ Jesus.

What follows are a few remarks from my reading. I do hope interests are piqued and you'll pick up a copy of Hogan's book. It's well worth a careful read.

The Introduction calls for a different perspective on suffering. Hogan entreats Christ-followers to embrace the transformation that comes by viewing the cross of Christ, not as an instrument of torture and death, but as a paradoxical lens through which we might view all circumstances in life. As with any paradox, there is irony.

Not only was the cross of Jesus Christ a paradox, but this very same paradox threads through the experience of all Christian life. Ironically what may seem to be death is paradoxically life, what may seem to be defeat is paradoxically victory, what may seem to be loss is paradoxically gain. Once we begin to perceive all of reality through this paradoxical lens of the cross, our ways of interpreting events and people in our lives change and expand – we begin to leave room for the perhaps hidden yet effective purposes of God in all things. (p 4)

Chapter 1 introduces the notion of “de-centering” as a starting place for our identity. We are not primarily individuals but beings in relation to others and to God. This is the heart of Paul's conversion experience on the Damascus road ([Acts 9:3-9](#)) and his pronouncement in [Gal. 2:20](#). The *modus operandi* for de-centering is sharing in Christ's sufferings and death (Philip 3:10) while maintaining a dual perspective on life; one earthly, the other heavenly. Since our fundamental identity is based on relationship, then we recognize that God is not absent in our suffering but remains with us through suffering. By self-emptying (or “de-centering”) we make room for the “uninterrupted presence of God” with us. God does not promise prevention but he does promise us his presence (pp 15-16), which is far better than side-stepping the bumps we encounter along life's journey. When our gaze is taken off ourselves and put on the cross of Christ, we gain clarity and are able to “perceive the effective work and design of God” (p 17).



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Chapter 2 zeroes in on perspective and paradox, focusing on the cross as “the lens for perceiving the true state of things” (p 18), albeit through paradox. Hogan presses in on God “accomplishing his will, even in or through the most dire of circumstances.” Cataloging Paul’s grasp of God’s “unfettered effectiveness” through the paradoxical lens of the cross, we are offered a glimpse into God’s kingdom. “What appears to be loss is actually gain...what appears to be death is in fact life...what appears to be our destruction is our salvation; what appears weak has strength; what appears cause for sorrow is actually cause for joy” (pp 20-21). This shift in perspective is the burden of Paul and is “key to interpreting our life experience as Christians.” Hogan notes, “what by earthly standards would appear to be death, destruction, humiliation, and defeat is radically reversed in the heavenly.” [Philippians 2:5-8](#), she opines, is the “central paradox” and the “defining paradigm” for believers who are exhorted to take on the same attitude as Christ (p 24). This is the way of Paul. This is the way of Christ. This is the way of Christ-followers. The paradox of the cross and the perspective it gives is God’s gift to us.

Hogan makes a crucial move on suffering that is often missed. Recalling Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” ([2 Cor 12:7](#)), the earthly and the heavenly kingdoms *coexist simultaneously*; the one does not give way to the other. Paul’s weakness did not turn into a strength. Rather, Paul experienced Christ’s strength *while remaining* humanly weak. That the two experiences are concurrent I find liberating when thinking about suffering. Instead of comfort coming as a result of a decrease in suffering, comfort is present *in* my suffering because of the presence of Christ himself in me. [2 Cor 12:9](#) does *not* say weakness turns into power; it says power is made perfect *in* weakness. That is, only with and in the presence of weakness is strength manifest.

Chapter 3 outlines the Christ Hymn of [Philippians 2:6-11](#) beautifully illustrating a paradoxical pattern from descent to ascent. The Christ Hymn shows movement; from being God to being emptied to being human, to being a slave, to obedience unto death, and not just any death, but finally to the lowest point of all, death on a cross. From the highest to the lowest; from exaltation to humiliation, Jesus’s journey is our map to guide us in transformation. From this lowest position, however, Christ’s ascent moves to a position of worship and adoration, exaltation and restoration. And in this movement, Christ involves us! Suffering takes us down into humiliation where we find the presence of Christ, then by that presence, we are lifted out of despair and given hope. While Hogan explicates three terms to unpack this idea (“*kenosis* or emptying, *enosis* or divine presence, and *theosis* or transformation”), this is essentially how the Christ Hymn works as the map to follow. Every chapter is punctuated with metaphors to consider, personal experiences, early Christian figures and some contemporary – all of which I found helpful – to aid in showing how this movement plays out in the spiritual life.

The notion of “belonging” begins chapter 4. Just as a child’s likeness manifests their belonging to her parents, not only physically but also in demeanor and behavior, so Paul showed his belonging to Christ. The contours of his character portrayed the imprint of his Lord. Both inside and out, Paul’s life so reflected the presence of Christ that his identity took on that of Christ’s ([Gal 2:20](#); [6:17](#); p 50). Indeed, this takes the “What Would Jesus Do?” movement to a whole new level and

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shows that the chapter's title is most appropriate ("Mark of the Messiah")! I'm reminded of Dallas Willard's quip "What would Jesus do if he were me?" which takes us to the next level.

To drive home this profound sense of belonging, Hogan highlights the V-shape symmetry between the texts [Philippians 2:6-11](#) vis-à-vis 3:5-15. She notes that "Paul's autobiographical story reflects the same movement and moments we discovered in the Christ Hymn—the motion of descending and ascending, as well as the moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis*. Observe the juxtaposition and symmetry:

6	Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,	5	Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee,
7	but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,	6	in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless.
8	he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.	7	[But] whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ.
9	Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,	8	More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ
10	and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.	9	and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith
		10	to know him and the power of his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death,
		11	if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.
		12	It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it,
		13	since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]. Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession.
		14	Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.
		15	Let us, then, who are "perfectly mature" adopt this attitude.

These "two texts describe two sides of the same coin, and together they provide a magnificent roadmap for us." Jesus is our pattern and roadmap for life (p 55). This pattern, it should also be noted, is not always a "rigid lock-step progression," but a "kaleidoscopic tapestry of upwardly ascending and interwoven moments" (p 58). Though the stages or moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis* (also called, "the Christ pattern") may be experienced distinctly, they are, in some mysterious way, fused together. The chapter concludes by devoting significant space to Paul's call for *mimesis* or imitation and would be an excellent framework for a full-on theology of imitation.

Chapter 5 takes on "creative adaptation" or the individual expression of imitating Christ in one's life. She begins by tracing the Christ pattern found in the lives of Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Teresa of Calcutta (aka "Mother Teresa"), Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jim Elliot, and others. Each of these had their own unique articulation of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis*, yet all were faithful imitators of Christ.

Even as we look to the almost endless variety of expression of the pattern, the particular hallmarks of the Christ pattern are the reliable constant: in each example of mimesis we find the outpouring of self in kenosis, the connection with Christ-in-community in enosis; and the transformative union of confessing and expressing Christ in theosis (pp 84-85).

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Most importantly, Hogan concludes, every follower of Christ finds a place on the tapestry of *mimesis*.

Your particular heart, your specific gifts, your circumstances, your sense of how God calls you, where you are being led – these things all provide the singular substance of the “you” ready to be rendered on the divine canvass in an utterly unique creative adaptation of the Christ pattern (p 85).

The next chapter, “Targets to Arrows”, speaks to the transformation piece of the Christ pattern. Divine presence is the secret to change toward *theosis*, or “our ever-progressing transformative union with God” (p 88). Hogan again stresses what I would call the perichoretic dance of this Christ pattern, namely, “these moments of *kenosis*, *enosis*, and *theosis* occur without sequence, and may be experienced separately, two overlapping together, and sometimes the confluence of all together at once – **and all are charged with divine effectiveness**” (p 88). Sometimes we are aware of the dance and sometimes we’re not aware. A measure of mystery remains because perception is limited. Nevertheless, the transformation does indeed take place, however gradual or nominal, unique or common, painful or pleasurable. “Our God is the God of the darkness of the crucifixion as well as the light-drenched resurrection” (p 91). Holding in one hand our pain and suffering while embracing the hope that Christ’s presence brings with the other is key. And, because God is with us at all times and in all places, even the dark corridors of our suffering, the transformation is effective and gain does come from loss. Courage and hope displace futility and despair. In fact, the “very act of our concentrated gaze and intense awareness of God as our central axis gives rise to transformation” (p 98)! This is the Christian story and this is the message Hogan wants us to get.

But there’s more. Personal transformation yields communal transformation (see, e.g., [2 Cor 1:3-4](#)). “the divine operates to transform us not only for the sake of our own transformation, but for the sake of the transformation of others” (p 99). In our transformation, we become, as it were, “divinized instruments of God;” we “become the way that God chooses to communicate the divine pattern and message to our fellow brothers and sisters” (p 101). Because the love of God has been poured into our hearts ([Rom 5:5](#)), and our hearts are never large enough to hold it all, then it necessarily spills over into the lives of others. As recipients of God’s love, we become instruments of God’s love toward others. This is the way of God. This is the Christ pattern.

The final chapter begins by comparing Paul and Bonhoeffer. Both faced imminent death and both were in prison, and both had the same paradoxical response to their circumstances, namely, joy. “This joy in God and from God eclipses all, and can be present in all, from our worst moments to our best moments.” How? On what reasonable basis does one experience joy in the midst of such suffering? Hogan explains that this joy is a product of love and our relationship to the Source of love (p 109). Although she does not address this trajectory, I wonder if this is why joy finds its place next to love as an expression of God’s fruitful presence in our lives ([Gal 5:22](#))? Once joy is grounded in love, then it follows that we experience peace about our circumstances. But I digress.

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Hogan spends substantial time annotating the Hebrew mindset of joy that no doubt would have been part of Paul's thinking. The lines are blurred between the interior experience of joy and its exterior expression; the latter necessarily emerges from the former. She then takes readers back to Philippians where Paul chooses joy as his "shocking, soaring and paradoxical message," despite being imprisoned and facing death (p 114)! With both feet planted firmly in two realities, the one earthly and the other heavenly, believers can confidently affirm that "whatever we are experiencing in the earthly, it does not touch upon the heavenly reality and our ultimate victory over the earthly circumstance" (p 115). Because the love of God expressed in Christ Jesus has so utterly and completely taken hold of Paul, joy not only informs him but saturates all his circumstances, events, relationships, thoughts, attitudes, and feelings. Joy transforms.

In addition to highlighting others' experience with joy, the remaining pages illustrate that joy is the result of viewing all of life through the lens of the cross.

There is so much more in Hogan's book that I have not mentioned here. I wish I had time for more. But this post has gone on long enough. I conclude with these inspired words from [Hebrews 12:1-3](#):

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. **Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.** Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. ³ Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up.*

Our joy awaits!