The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life - The life on wings.

~Other Speakers S-Z: Hannah Whitall Smith:

This life hid with Christ in God has many aspects, and can be considered under a great many different figures. One aspect has been a great help and inspiration to me. I think it may also help some other longing and hungry souls. It is what I call the life on wings.

Our Lord has not only told us to consider the "lilies of the field" (Matthew 6:28), but also the "birds of the air" (Matthew 8:20). I have found that these little winged creatures have some wonderful lessons for us. In one of the Psalms, the Psalmist, after specifying the darkness and bitterness of his life in this earthly sphere of trial, cries out, "Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest. Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest" (Psalm 55:6-8).

This cry for "wings" is as old as humanity. Our souls were made to "mount up with wings." They can never be satisfied with anything short of flying. The captive-born eagle feels within it the instinct of flight and is irritated and worried about its imprisonment, hardly knowing what it longs for. Our souls, too, are irritated and worried and cry out for freedom. We can never rest on earth, and we long to "fly away" from all that holds and hampers and imprisons us here.

In seeking an outward escape from our circumstances or from our miseries, restlessness and discontentment grow. At first we do not recognize that our only way of escape is to "mount up with wings" (Isaiah 40:31), and we try to "flee on horses," as the Israelites did, when oppressed by their trials (see Isaiah 30:16).

A Way Of Escape

Our "horses" are the outward things on which we depend for relief, some change of circumstance, or some help from man. We mount on these and run east or west, north or south anywhere to get away from our trouble. In our ignorance we think that a change of our environment is all that is necessary to experience deliverance of our souls. But all such efforts to escape do not help. The soul is not made to "flee upon horses," but must make its flight always upon wings.

Moreover, as with the Israelites, these "horses" generally carry us out of one trouble only to land us in another. It is as the prophet Amos says, "As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him" (Amos 5:19). How often have we also run from some "lion" in our pathway only to be met by a "bear." How often we have hidden ourselves in a place of supposed safety only to be bitten by a "serpent!" It is useless for the soul to hope to escape by running away from its troubles to any earthly refuge. There is not one that can give it deliverance.

Is there no way of escape for us, then, when in trouble or distress? Must we just plod wearily through it all and look for no relief? I rejoice to answer that there is a glorious way of escape for every one of us, if we will but mount up on wings and fly away from it all to God. It is not a way east or west or north or south, but it is a way upwards. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

All creatures that have wings can escape from every snare that is set from them, if only they will fly high enough. The soul that uses its wings can always find a sure "way to escape" from all that can hurt or trouble it.

What, then, are these wings? The secret is contained ill the words, "They that wait upon the Lord." The soul that waits upon the Lord is the soul that is entirely surrendered to Him and trusts Him perfectly. Therefore, we might name our wings the wings of Surrender and of Trust. If we will only completely surrender ourselves to the Lord and trust Him perfectly, we will find our souls "mounting up with wings as eagles" to the "heavenly places" in Christ Jesus, where earthly annoyances or sorrows have no power to disturb us.

The wings of the soul carry it up into a spiritual plane of life, into the "life hid with Christ in God," which is a life utterly independent of circumstances, and one that no cage can imprison and no shackles bind.

The "things above" are the things the soul on wings cares about, not the "things on the earth." It views life and all its experiences from the high altitude of "heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6). Things look very different according to the standpoint from which we view them. The caterpillar, as it creeps along the ground, must have a widely different "view" of the world around it, from that which the same caterpillar will have when its wings are developed, and it soars in the air above the very places where once it crawled.
Similarly, the crawling soul must see things in a very different way from the soul that has "mounted up with wings." The mountain top may blaze with sunshine when the valley below is shrouded in fog. The bird whose wings can carry him high enough may mount at will out of the gloom below into the joy of the sunlight above.

Mount Up With Wings

Once, while spending a winter in London, I did not see any genuine sunshine for three long months because of the dense clouds of smoke that hung over the city like a shroud. But many times I saw that above the smoke the sun was shining. Once or twice through a rift I had a glimpse of a bird, with sunshine on its wings, sailing above the fog in the clear blue of the sunlit sky. Not all the brooms in London could sweep away the fog. But could we only mount high enough, we would reach a region above it all.

This is what the soul on wings does. It overcomes the world through faith. To overcome means to "come over" not to be crushed under and the soul on wings flies over the world and the things of it. These lose their power to hold or bind the spirit that can "come over" them on the wings of Surrender and Trust. That spirit is made in very truth "more than conqueror" (Romans 8:37).

Birds overcome the lower law of gravitation by the higher law of flight. The soul on wings overcomes the lower law of sin and misery and bondage by the higher law of spiritual flying. The "law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:2) must be a higher and more dominant law than the law of sin and death. Therefore, the soul that has mounted into this upper region of the life in Christ cannot fail to conquer and triumph.

But it may be asked how it is, then, that all Christians do not always triumph. I answer that it is because a great many Christians do not "mount up with wings" into this higher plane of life at all. They live on the same low level with their circumstances. Instead of flying over them, they try to fight them on their own earthly plane. On the earthly plane the soul is powerless. It has no weapons with which to conquer. Instead of overcoming (coming over) the trials and sorrows of the earthly life, it is overcome by them and crushed under them.

We all know, as I have said, that things look differently to us according to our "point of view." Trials assume a very different aspect when looked down upon from above, than when viewed from their own level. What seems like an impassable wall on its own level becomes an insignificant line to the eyes that see it from the top of a mountain. The snares and sorrows that assume such immense proportion while we look at them on the earthly plane, become insignificant when the soul has mounted on wings to the heavenly places above them.

A friend once illustrated the difference in her friends in the following way. She said, if all three came to a spiritual mountain which had to be crossed, the first one would tunnel through it with hard and wearisome labor. The second would meander around it in an indefinite fashion, hardly knowing where she was going, and yet, because her aim was right, would get around it at last. But the third, she said, would just flap her wings and fly right over. All of us must know something about this. If any of us in the past have tried to tunnel our way through the mountains that have stood across our pathway, or have been meandering around them, let us now resolve to spread our wings and "mount up" into the clear atmosphere of God's presence. There it will be easy to overcome, or come over, the highest mountain of them all.

Made For Heavenly Heights

I say, "spread our wings and mount up," because the largest wings ever known cannot lift a bird one inch upward unless they are used. We must use our wings, or they are of no help to us.

It is not worthwhile to say, "If I had wings I would flee." For we already have the wings; we should use them. The power to surrender and trust exists in every human soul, and only needs to be exercised. With these two wings we can "flee" to God at any moment. But, in order really to reach Him, we must actively use them. We must not merely want to use them, we must do it definitely and actively. A passive surrender or a passive trust will not do. I mean this very practically. We will not "mount up" very high, if we only surrender and trust in theory, or in our especially spiritual moments. We must do it definitely and practically, about each detail of daily life as it comes to us.

We must meet our disappointments, our betrayals, our persecutions, our malicious enemies, our provoking friends, our trials and temptations of every sort, with an active and experimental attitude of surrender and trust. We must spread our wings and "mount up" to the "heavenly places in Christ" above them all, where they will lose their power to harm or distress us. For from these high places we will see things through the eye of Christ, and all earth will be glorified in the heavenly vision.
"The dove has neither claw nor sting,  
Nor weapon for the fight;  
She owes her safety to the wing,  
Her victory to flight.  
The Bridegroom opens His arms of love,  
And in them folds the panting dove."

How changed our lives would be if we could only fly through the days on these wings of surrender and trust! Instead of stirring up strife and bitterness by trying to fight offending brothers and sisters, we should escape all strife by simply spreading our wings and mounting up to the heavenly region. There our eyes would see all things covered with a mantle of Christian love and pity.

Our souls were made to live in this upper atmosphere, and we stifle and choke on any lower level. Our eyes were made to look off from these heavenly heights, and our vision is distorted by any lower gazing. It is a great blessing, therefore, that our loving Father in heaven has mercifully arranged all the discipline of our lives with a view to teaching us to fly.

In Deuteronomy we have a picture of how this teaching is done: "As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wing: so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him" (Deuteronomy 32:1 112).

The mother eagle teaches her little ones to fly by making their nest so uncomfortable that they are forced to leave it and commit themselves to the unknown world of air outside. God does the same to us. He stirs up our comfortable nests, pushes us over the edge of them, and we are forced to use our wings to save ourselves from fatal falling. Read your trials in this light, and see if you cannot begin to get a glimpse of their meaning. Your wings are being developed.

I knew a lady whose life was one long strain of trial, from a cruel, wicked, drunken husband. There was no possibility of human help, and in her despair she was driven to use her wings and fly to God. And during the long year of trial her wings grew so strong from constant flying, that at last, when the trials were at their hardest, it seemed to her as if her soul was carried over them on a beautiful rainbow and found itself in a peaceful resting place on the other side.

Hindrances To Flying

With this end in view we can surely accept with thankfulness every trial that compels us to use our wings, for only then can they grow strong and large and fit for the highest flying. Unused wings gradually wither and shrink and lose their flying power. If we had nothing in our lives that made flying necessary, we might at last lose all capacity to fly.

But you may ask, "Are there no hindrances to flying, even where the wings are strong, and the soul is trying hard to use them?" I answer, "Yes." A bird may be imprisoned in a cage; it may be tethered to the ground with a cord; it may be loaded with a weight that drags it down, or it may be entrapped in the "snare of the fowler" (Psalm 91:3). Hindrances may make it impossible for the soul to fly, until it has been set free from them by the mighty power of God.

One "snare of the fowler" that entraps many souls is the snare of doubt. The doubts look so plausible and often so humble, that Christians walk into their "snare" without dreaming for a moment that it is a snare at all, until they find themselves caught and unable to fly. There is no more possibility of flying for the soul that doubts, than there is for the bird caught in the fowler’s snare.

The reason for this is evident. One of our wings, namely, the wing of trust, is entirely disabled by the slightest doubt. Just as it requires two wings to lift a bird in the air, it requires two wings to lift the soul. A great many people do everything but trust. They spread the wing of surrender, and use it vigorously. They wonder why they do not mount up, never dreaming that it is because all the while the wing of trust is hanging idle by their sides.
It is because Christians use only one wing, that their efforts to fly are often so irregular and fruitless.

Look at a bird with a broken wing trying to fly, and you will get some idea of the kind of motion all onesided flying must make. We must use both our wings, or not try to fly at all.

It may be that for some the "snare of the fowler" is some subtle form of sin, some hidden want of consecration. Where this is the case, the wing of trust may seem to be all right, but the wing of surrender hangs idly down. It is just as hopeless to try to fly with the wing of trust alone, as with the wing of surrender alone. Both wings must be used, or no flying is possible.

Or perhaps the soul may feel as if it were in a prison from which it cannot escape, and consequently is unable to mount up on wings. No earthly bars can ever imprison the soul. No walls however high, or bolts however strong, can imprison an eagle, so long as there is an open way upward. Earth's power can never hold the soul in prison while the upward way is kept open and free. Our enemies may build walls around us as high as they please, but they cannot build any barrier between us and God. If we "mount up with wings," we can fly higher than any of their walls can ever reach.

If we find ourselves imprisoned, we may be sure that it is not our earthly environment that constitutes our jail cell, for the soul's wings scorn all petty bars and walls of earth's making. The only thing that can really imprison the soul is something that hinders its upward flight. Isaiah 59:2 tells us "your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear." Therefore, if our soul is imprisoned, it must be because some indulged sin has built a barrier between us and the Lord, and we cannot fly until this sin is given up and put out of the way.

Cut Loose From Earthly Ties

But often, where there is no conscious sin, the soul is still unconsciously tethered to something of earth. It struggles in vain to fly. Some of my friends once got into a boat in Norway to row around one of the inlets there. They took their seats and began to row vigorously, but the boat made no headway. They put out more strength and rowed harder than before, but all in vain. The boat didn't move an inch. Then someone remembered that the boat had not been unmoored, and he exclaimed, "No wonder we could not get away, when we were trying to pull the whole continent of Europe after us!" Our souls are likewise often not unmoored from earthly things. We must cut ourselves loose. As an eagle might try to fly with a hundredton weight tied fast to its feet, the soul may try to "mount up with wings" while a weight of earthly cares and anxieties is holding it down to earth.

When our Lord was trying to teach His disciples concerning this danger, He told them a parable of a great supper to which many who were invited failed to come because they were hindered by their earthly cares. One had bought a piece of land, another a yoke of oxen, and a third had married a wife. They felt that all these things needed their care.

Wives or oxen or land or even smaller things may be the cords that tether the soul from flying or the weight that holds it down. Let us then cut every cord and remove every barrier so our souls may find no hindrance to their mounting up with wings as eagles to heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

We are commanded to have our hearts filled with songs of rejoicing and to make inward melody to the Lord. But unless we mount up with wings this is impossible, for the only creature that can sing is the creature that flies. Though all the world should be desolate, Habakkuk 3:18 says, "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." Paul knew what it was to use his wings when he found himself "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6: 10). On the earthly plane all was dark to both, but on the heavenly plane all was brightest sunshine.

Do you know anything about this life on wings? Do you "mount up" continually to God, out of and above earth's cares and trials, to that higher plane of life where all is peace and triumph? Or, do you plod wearily along on foot through the midst of your trials and let them overwhelm you at every turn?

Let us guard against a mistake here. Do not think that by flying I mean very joyous emotions or feelings of exhilaration. There is a great deal of emotional flying that is not really flying at all. It is such flying as a feather accomplishes which is driven upward by a strong puff of wind, but flutters down again as soon as the wind ceases to blow. The flying I mean is a matter of principle, not a matter of emotion. It may be accompanied by very joyous emotions, but it does not depend on them. It depends only upon the facts of an entire surrender and an absolute trust. Everyone who will honestly use these two wings and will faithfully persist in using them
will find that they have mounted up with wings as an eagle, no matter how empty of all emotion they may have felt themselves to be before.

For the promise is sure: "They that wait upon the Lord shall mount up with wings as eagles." Not "may perhaps mount up," but "shall." It is the inevitable result. May we each one prove it for ourselves!