Letter 41: God within You

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Ben Nickodemus
Concordia University - Portland

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean

Part of the Nonfiction Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol13/iss1/7
LETTER 41: GOD WITHIN YOU

Lucius Annaeus Seneca; trans. Ben Nickodemus

You do the best and most beneficial thing for yourself if, when you write, you persevere with effort to a good understanding, which is foolish to desire when you are able to obtain it from yourself. We do not need to lift our hands to the heavens nor to beg the keeper of the temple so he will let us in to the ear of the statue as if we are able to be heard more plainly there: god is near to you, he is with you, he is within you. If I may put it this way, Lucilius: The holy spirit resides within us, he is the watcher of our bad and good things and our guardian; just as he (holy spirit) has been treated by us, so we are treated by him. Truly no man is good without god: For, is anyone able to rise up above luck except by his help? It gives noble and upright counsel. “God dwells in each good man (which god is uncertain)”.1

When you come upon a grove full of old trees which are beyond the usual height, and shut out the view of the sky by their dense branches, then the height of the forest, the solitude of the spot, and the admiration of the shade in the middle of the open spaces will prove to you the continuing presence of the deity. If a deep cave that is eaten out (eroded) of its rocks supports a mountain, not by the hand of man, but hollowed out in such roominess by natural causes in such spaciousness, it strikes your soul with a certain conception of religion. We revere the head of the great river; we have altars where a huge river suddenly breaks out of hiding [from the ground]. We worship fountains of hot water, and we consecrate a certain pool because of its darkness or immense depth. If you would have seen a man not terrified of danger, untouched with desires, happy within hostility, calm in the middle of the tempest, who looks down on men from a superior place, who looks at god from an equal place, do you not venerate him? Will you not say, “This one is too great and too high to be believed like to that of a tiny body in which it resides?”

The divine strength comes down upon that man; the soul rises above other souls when it is controlled, when it passes through all things as if they are small things, when it laughs at whatever we fear and pray, this is led by heavenly power. A thing that is so great is not able to stand without the support of the divine will. Therefore, the greater part of it is from that place where it came down. Just as rays of the sun touch the earth still they abide there from where they were sent. So also a great and sacred soul is sent in order that we may know certain divine things more closely; indeed they live with us but cling to their original source; to there they hang, to there they hope and strive, as they are concerned with us, but they are better than us.

1 Aeneid 8:352
Therefore, what is this spirit? It is the one who shines by no good [outside of himself] but only by the good of himself. Who truly is so foolish to praise in man a thing other than what is in him? What is more insane are those who marvel at things that are able to be transferred to another at any given moment. They do not make a horse better by means of a golden bridle. A lion with a gilded mane, is forced to wear and to endure the decoration while he is trained, is sent out [into the arena] differently than the otherwise wild lion. The spirit of the latter is whole; the latter is impressive indeed with a violent impulse, as his nature wishes. The impressive rough nature of him is his glory, to be seen not without fear. This is preferred to that weak and gilded one.

No one ought to glory except with what is his own. We praise a vine if shoots of fruit load it, if the supports of the vine themselves hang down by the weight of those things which it has born; now would anyone prefer to that vine from which a golden cluster of grapes and a golden leaf hang on? In a vine, special virtue is the fruitfulness of itself. In man also we ought to praise that which is his own. If he has a beautiful family and a beautiful house, he sows much, he lends much money on interest; nothing is in the man himself but these things are around him. Praise the thing in him which is not able to be neither snatched away nor stolen. This is the special virtue of man. Do you seek what this would be? It is the soul, and reason perfected in the soul. For man is a rational animal; thus a good thing of him is completed, if he fills that role for which he was born. Moreover, what is the thing which reason demands from him? It is the easiest thing: to live following his own nature. But this is made difficult by the general insanity of men: we push one another into vice. In what way therefore is man able to be restored to health (both spiritual and physical) when no one restrains him and when the people propel him into vice?

I give many thanks to Prof. Michael Thomas for his guidance throughout this project and to Dr. Richard M. Gummere whose translation I viewed as a valued reference.

---

2 A golden collar

http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol13/iss1/7