

Life At Its Best

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Every life has its one great purpose. To some men to live is business. They spend every waking hour in planning for its progress or its expansion, or in solving its problems, or in studying its methods. Their conversation leads inevitably to this one absorbing topic. To some men to live is money. They are immersed in the pursuit of it. They weigh every action and every situation from the standpoint of profits. They love the power and prestige and sense of success money seems to beget. To some men life is fame. They covet it and feed upon it. They are consumed with jealousy if others succeed, and they are already beginning to die when their careers no longer fill the public eye. To some men life is pleasure. Everything else is but an interlude between the hours when they may pursue the things that give them enjoyment. To live is to feel the thrill, to indulge the desires of sense. When these are gone all is gone. Somewhere amid all the infinite variety of human employments every man has made his choice.

Such instances of absorption in the many things that men deem the substance of life offers some insight into Paul's concise summary of his own great purpose. "To me to live is Christ." And of course the emphatic word is "me", for with clarity and finality he asserts his own decision. Paul was well aware of the variety and attractiveness of life's possible interests. He knew how men had found an outlet for their energies in culture, or in learning, or in the world of public affairs. He was not a second-rate personality of limited ability or weak character whose opportunities had been few and uninspiring. But he had met Christ in a searching, face to face encounter. There and then everything had been settled as far as Paul was concerned. From that day on there was no other person and no other concern for him. All his energies and ambitions had been captured. He could think of no pursuit that would offer a fraction of the satisfaction to be found in his Lord.

As he wrote these words, "To me to live is Christ," he was facing what we might consider a dark prospect. He had already languished some years in prison, and the threat that his tardy trial might end in death was even yet hanging over him, for the possibility that his testimony might mean martyrdom was very real. But neither these nor any other circumstances ever dimmed the radiance of his spirit, or made him regret his choice. What he was here writing to his Philippian friends was not a record of his feeling in happier, freer times; it was present conviction. Now as much as

at any other time, to live was Christ. The fellowship was still real. In prison or out, his testimony was just what it had always been. Life was meaningful and satisfying. He had surely found the secret of life at its best. It is a secret we all wish we might discover. Perhaps thought about his words will help us to find what he found.

I

"To me to live is Christ". First of all, this must mean that service for Christ was life's one great concern. Paul always looked at every situation and condition as an opportunity to be turned to account for Christ. No time in his life gives us a clearer idea of what this means than the time when the words of the text were written. We have noted that he is even at the moment a prisoner, which of itself must have been trial enough to a man used to the freedom of action he had enjoyed, to say nothing of the added burden of being for so long under the shadow of the penalty he might have to pay. Under the like circumstances most of us would no doubt be inclined to rest on our oars in a feeling that now at least no service could well be expected of us, for our anxieties and privations and sufferings would be enough to excuse us from further obligations. But it was not so with Paul. "The things which have happened to me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel." He was bound, but the word of God was not bound. His witness became more effective than ever, for, as he said, his bonds "became manifest in Christ throughout the whole praetorian guard, and to all the rest", by which we suppose it is meant that it became known to all the men composing this body of troops and to others on up into higher circles that this prisoner was in bonds for the sake of what he believed about Jesus Christ -- not for crime, nor for insurrection, but for Christ.

Observe, then, how things had turned out for Paul. Suppose he had come down to Rome a free man in the ordinary course of his journeys as a missionary. Having settled in the City, he would look about for means of making it known that he was there in the interests of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It might be he would give notice that at a certain time and place he would be preaching, posting the notice in a public place. Perhaps he would have posted such a notice where the members of the praetorian guard might see it if they cared to read it, and perhaps he even might have extended a special invitation to them to attend. How many of these soldiers do you suppose would have responded? How many of the idolatrous Romans would have attended? How long would it have been before Paul was able to reach any member of the household of Caesar? One can conceive that under these circumstances the responses would have been slow indeed, and the audiences from the pagan

world would have been small.

However, what actually did happen? Paul came to Rome a prisoner. That meant that he was constantly guarded by a soldier; it may even have meant that he was chained to one constantly. A new guard would then be assigned to him at intervals, every two hours, or every four or six. In the course of each twenty-four hours six or eight or more members of the guard would perforce have to sit in the company of the Apostle. As the two years in the hired dwelling rolled by man after man was thus thrust into the society of the most radiant witness Christ ever had. Paul used it all for the service of his Lord, since for him to live was Christ. Instead of complaining about his lack of privacy, or his lack of freedom, he kept right on living this life to the full, even in the place of confinement. One by one these men heard of the Saviour, of the offer of new life, of the need of the human heart, of what Christ meant to the prisoner. No doubt some of these hard soldiers would curse and revile him. Some perhaps would laugh. Some would be too dull or hard to hear. And some would respond. But at least everybody came to know why Paul was there -- hundreds of them maybe -- and they learned who Christ was whether they wanted to or not, and they were told what Christ could do for them and what it meant that there was a Gospel. So those bonds became manifest in Christ, not only to the guard, but also to all the rest whoever they may have been. It is even reported that the lonely prisoner reached up from the house where he was confined into the household and family of the Emperor himself to win people to his Lord. Can you think of a better way for the Gospel to become known in Rome than just the way God took, sending a man under arrest to sit at the heart of the Empire? Was there any other way, in fact, whereby the Gospel could have penetrated to the very highest levels of society? When God does have a man for whom the service of Christ is the one great concern it seems that almost impossible things can be accomplished.

What we have been describing is indeed but one instance of this concern in Paul's life. There was a former prison experience when he and his companions sang in the darkness of midnight bound in the stocks; and then when the earthquake set them free they used the occasion to proclaim the Name of Christ to a would-be suicide. There was the occasion when he stood on the deck of a reeling ship in the courage of faith to steady a crew of frightened men, and then cast upon an island when the ship was wrecked he was counting for Christ almost before he was dry. We recall the seeming indifference with which he bore persecution and hardship and enmity in every city where he went to preach, wondering how he could endure it and finding our only answer in these words he has himself given

us as the secret of his tireless devotion, that living for him was Christ. We recall his years of unremitting toil; we can imagine how he felt no day should end without its work of love, or its deed of kindness, or its wanderer sought, since service for Christ was all that made any difference.

It may be that we contemplate with a certain feeling of despair the activity of this wonderful servant of Christ. We may be dedicated to the same service, but is this the measure of it? Who is sufficient for such a calling? Paul seems so far beyond us. We do not have his abilities. We doubt that we could ever match his courage, or his powers of endurance. If we are disposed to allow such thoughts to discourage us, however, we need to remember that we are not called to do his work, but to do our own. It is not his achievement we are to imitate, it is his consecration; and there is nothing hindering us from taking his secret for our own, and saying that to us also to live is Christ. It is related concerning a surgeon in India that he has a picture of the Christ hanging in his surgery. He is not himself a Christian, yet before every operation he takes his instruments in his hands, stands before the picture for a moment in meditation, and holds the instruments up in silent dedication. Nothing is hindering us from doing that with what we have. Life may be great or humble, talents many or few; but they can all be offered. It is the heart that counts.

Isaac Walton is best known to us for his work on "The Compleat Angler". Yet this is not his only literary effort. He was an admirer of the famous preacher John Donne, and wrote a biography of his friend. In the preface of the book he gave his reason for writing it: "I want to set his name on fire". What a worthy ambition for the disciple of Jesus Christ, and how worthy our Lord is that such should be our tribute to Him! We can set His Name on fire. We can if life is so identified with Him that every hour is an act of devotion.

II

We look at a second fact of Paul's great word about the secret of his life. He tells us that fellowship with Christ was for him the one chief source of satisfaction. We recall again that he was a prisoner, but outer circumstances could not interrupt the deep inner experience of the nearness of his Lord. His Friend was with him everywhere. In this same letter to the Philippians he wrote that departing was only to be with the Christ whom he knew here; life meant the same union with Him both here and there. And later he wrote to tell them, "The Lord is at hand", which words are commonly interpreted to mean that the Lord's return would be soon, but could also mean that as he sat alone in his house, or as he bent over his parchments to read, or as he wrote to his churches

out over the Empire. One was always there in the room by his side, watching, comforting, giving counsel, strengthening faith, ministering to His prisoner's needs in gracious and unseen ways. So what the non-Christian might look upon as a bitter ordeal, and what many Christians might look upon as a severe test of faith, Paul in a sense hardly even noticed, for to him to live anywhere was to be with his Lord. No circumstances imposed by the world could ever rob the Apostle of his one great source of satisfaction.

We are almost left speechless when we think what went on in the prison house where Paul was confined. What can anyone say about the soul of such a man? It was here that he wrote the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, in which he told how the immeasurable power of God Himself was manifest in the Christ of his experience, and passed on to dwell upon the love that passed all knowledge. It was here he wrote to the Colossians of a Christ in whom is all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, the One in whom they were themselves made full. It was here that he wrote in this same letter to his Philippian friends about emptying of self as Jesus Christ had done, and of the way in which this perfect work of self-emptying had become the way to exaltation to the right hand of God. Is it possible that the Lord brought about this imprisonment on purpose, that in moments of enforced quietness when the care of the churches was in measure laid aside and the call of regions beyond could not be answered, Paul might enter even more deeply than ever before into the fellowship of his Saviour with Whom he had already walked so many years? How the room where he sat must have glowed with the glory of the Presence in his heart.

Moreover, we can imagine what occupied Paul's mind on all the lonely, dusty journeys from city to city; or during the days when he toiled over his tents; or while he sailed back and forth over the sea in the little ships. All the time he was busy with thoughts of Christ. There may have been times when he could hardly recall the road he had travelled or the places he had seen, because he was so absorbed in converse with his Friend. We can see why he was not too much cast down by failures and disappointments and trials, for in good and evil alike there was always the nearness of Christ.

Death itself was not too threatening. In fact, its only shadow was the thought of leaving his young converts. For himself it was only the fulfillment of every hope in the meeting face to face with the One he had loved so long though he had not seen Him. Some years ago there was a radiant Christian student at Yale University named H. B. Wright, whose witness had been a blessing to many. When he died in 1923, his last words were, "I am sure of Christ. Life has been so wonderful, and it is going to be more

wonderful." Someone once asked David Livingstone how he endured the awful loneliness of the jungle where there was no companionship. His answer was, "I am never alone." Paul was not the only disciple for whom this fellowship was the one great satisfaction. And this same satisfaction is awaiting anyone who will accept it now.

Paul has given us the phrase "in Christ". It puts everything in a word. It is the Christian experience. It is what we feel in our hearts, and what we are trying to say to men about our Gospel. "If any man be in Christ" - "In the heavenly places in Christ" - these expressions are Paul's way of trying to make clear what he meant when he declared that to him to live was Christ. In a Christian home in Scotland two men had been in long, earnest conversation. When the visitor was about to leave, the host rose and opened a panel in the wall above the fireplace, revealing a painting of Christ on the Cross. After they had looked in silence for a moment, the host slowly drew the panel back again, and said, "I could not live with that always before me, but I know it's there." This is life at its best -- a fellowship which is its one great satisfaction. When the day comes, as it must come for us all, that we look back from the approaching end of the road, we will surely count this our one best memory. It will not be in our achievements or our fame or our possessions or our victories or our honors we will boast. The greatest peace of heart will be found in the time we have spent in the company of Christ.

An English sailor after years in the fleet of Sir Francis Drake met one who had been an acquaintance in earlier days. The acquaintance remarked, "You have not made much out of all these years". The sailor replied, "No, I've not made much. I've been cold, hungry, shipwrecked, desperately frightened often; but I've been with the greatest captain who ever sailed the seas." (Cf. James Stewart, *A Faith to Proclaim*, p. 151). One can imagine how some man of the world might look at Paul sitting in the prison house. He had little to show for his life, outwardly. He had been beaten, persecuted, arrested, stoned, shipwrecked, betrayed. But one fancies Paul might have replied that he didn't have too much to show for all these years in one sense, but that whatever else he may have missed, he had walked the roads with the greatest Captain who ever lived.

III

Let us think of Paul's words from still another point of view. They suggest that, when life is Christ, then the knowledge of Christ is life's one great achievement. A little farther on in this letter Paul will say, "That I may know him". For such knowledge he was willing to count all things loss. And, indeed, it was no small

goal he had set for himself. Here is a field of investigation worthy of the noblest minds -- to explore all that the coming of the Son of God means in all the various areas of human thought and life and experience.

We suppose that once Paul had spent his days rummaging through dry, musty texts. He had spent long hours in argument with the lawyers concerning the small details of legal questions, such as the width of phylacteries. He had toiled through mountains of accumulated traditions of the elders, because he thought there he might find the way to righteousness. He had weighed with care the placing of jots and tittles. He had laboriously assessed the rights and wrongs of the observance of the Sabbath, perhaps disputing endlessly with other schools of thought. At least, all this would appear to have been the manner of life of one who had once been a member of the strictest sect of the Pharisees, and who had been zealous for the religion of his fathers. In those days he had supposed he was doing important work, no doubt. He may even have looked with some disdain upon men occupied in the everyday business of earning a living fishing, for example.

When the full vision of Christ dawned on his soul, what an experience it must have been for this man. Out of all this pettiness he could move into the wide world of a new, free life, with all the possibilities of exploration into the meaning of Christ for himself, for his nation, for the world, for history, for eternity. For freedom Christ had set him free. All things were his now, life, death, things present, things to come. He must have felt as if he had been suddenly released from a prison house of the mind and soul. It must have been like the striking off of shackles as he began to exercise his powers. What a tragedy it would have been had the man capable of writing Romans or Ephesians never found release from the narrow confinement of legalistic religion and spiritual pride. From the day he first found the living presence of his Lord, Paul had lived to acquire knowledge of Him. That was life at its best.

Men still live for small things. Christian men do so. With all the wealth of experience open to them in Christ, how often they remain imprisoned in the narrow confines of tradition or spend the energies of mind and spirit on jots and tittles. The house organ of a business firm gives us this interesting biographical note: "A man once found a shiny new dime in the road. From then on his mind was focused on small things and he never lifted his eyes from the ground while walking. At the end of forty years he accumulated 34,947 buttons, 54,712 pins, 11 pennies, a bent back and a bad disposition. He lost the glories of the light, the smiles of his friends, the beauties of nature, and opportunity to serve his fellow-man." We can probably think of not a few who have been the victims

of the insignificant. It may be we ought not to speak of others, but should rather think of ourselves and enquire how far we are self-limited by preoccupation with minor pursuits.

What an attainment it is to come to know truth as it is in Jesus Christ. It is now two thousand years since He stood on the hillsides of Galilee teaching the multitudes. The world has learned many things since then. But with all our study we have only begun to see what this Teacher meant by the simplest of His utterances. He said, "I am the light of the world". We have known this word for this long time, but who would say he has exhausted its meaning? He said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden". These words are among the most comforting and inviting ever spoken. We have never exhausted their depths. He pointed to lessons to be learned from the lily and the sparrow; ordinary as these are, we have not yet learned all they would teach us about God. He once offered the simple rule of life, "Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away". Just what changes would be wrought in the entire structure of civilization if the secret in those words was to be made the basis of action over any considerable area of human relationships? No wonder we feel justified in saying that for Paul part of what he meant by saying, "To live is Christ," was that knowledge of Christ would be life's greatest achievement. Where can the powers of the mind and the soul be more profitably employed than in the endeavor to know the teaching of this Christ?

Consider what an attainment it is to know the meaning of the death of Christ. There is no need to enumerate the learned men who have spent no small amount of their time and thought in trying to understand this subject. After Thomas Aquinas had worshipped at the Cross, he left off writing, saying, "That which I have seen today makes all that I have written seem as trash. I shall not write another word". Who can tell all that this deed means for God, for man, for history, or for the universe? To know even part of it would certainly rank as one of life's greatest achievements.

Consider what an attainment it would be to know the power and significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Paul was ambitious to know it. He found here an event that unlocked the deepest secrets of man's nature and experience. We feel as we read him that he spent long hours in meditating on the truth of the open tomb. And we feel that in spite of all he had come to see there were realms of meaning yet unexplored.

And these great matters of His teaching and His death and His resurrection are after all but the beginning of what is to be known concerning our Lord. It would be an achievement to know

the Majesty on High. It would be a great thing to know the measure of His love. It would be a worthy field of investigation to consider His reign as the One to Whom has been entrusted the government of all things visible and invisible. This is life at its best -- to open the mind and heart to all this vast world of truth. It is a glorious prospect. To know Him is to be lifted out of all narrow pursuits. Such exploration invites us all in Christ. And we need not fear that we will ever be disappointed, for in Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and the excellency of that knowledge is well worth any price we may have to pay to possess it. Gounod the musician is reported to have said to a certain young poet, "As you grow in your art you will judge the great masters of the past as I now judge the great musicians of the past. At your age I used to say 'I'; at twenty-five I said 'I and Mozart'; at forty 'Mozart and I'; now I say 'Mozart'". "That I may know him" -- there is really nothing else to equal that as a life's accomplishment.

When life is Christ, it is life at its best. Paul found it. We may have it, too. Vistas of experience and knowledge and fellowship are before us. We have chosen Christ for ourselves, and that is good. But let no one forget how great his opportunities are since that choice has been made. Since we are in Christ we are new creatures, and our world is new. Life can be wonderful.

Thy miracles in Galilee
 When all the world went after Thee
 To bless their sick, to touch their blind,
 O Gracious Healer of mankind,
 But fan my faith to brighter glow!
 Have I not seen, do I not know
 One greater miracle than these?
 That Thou, the Lord of Life, shouldst please
 To walk beside me all the way,
 My Comrade of the Everyday!

Those other miracles I know
 Were far away, were long ago
 But this, that I may see Thy face
 Transforming all the commonplace,
 May work with Thee, and watch Thee bless
 My little loaves in tenderness;
 This sends me singing on my way.
 O Comrade of the Everyday!

(Molly Anderson Haley)