

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

Introduction

What is the secret of Christian living? Is there one thing that explains it? What is the psychology of the Christian?

Some people are highly focused – for them life is ... It may be sport, money, family, career, there are many things that so govern a person that they can say, 'This is what life is about'. For the Christian, life is about Christ. He is far more than an interest or a chosen activity; he is the very reason to live and to live in a particular way.

Paul wrote, 'For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain'. This raises a number of questions. Why? Is focusing on one thing not boring? Is Paul's statement typical of Christians generally? What does it mean in practice?

It starts with experience

The experience may be in our thinking – a conviction that the gospel is true, or an encounter as was the case with Paul. But it grows into the influence that a living person has on us, and the relationship that develops as a result.

Paul's initial experience was vivid and instant. Jesus met him and showed his divine glory so that Paul could only fall before him. Even if we have not had a dramatic experience, have we perceived Jesus' glory in a way that leads us to say, 'What do you want me to do?' and obey him cheerfully?

Paul's experience came after he had been 'goaded' in a number of ways. He had heard the rumours of Jesus' resurrection and seen that they could not be quashed. He witnessed Stephen's martyrdom. His conscience began to trouble him about coveting, and he lost his self-image as a result – 'sin revived and I died'.

The experience had a deep impact and left him a changed man. Even if our experience was not like his – have we been changed at heart because of what we know of Jesus?

He was convinced Jesus was real – not a dead man. Do we see him as no longer a story, but as someone from whom we cannot escape? Paul realised his death was not the death of a rebel but that it was overseen by God who endorsed his claims by raising him from the dead.

Paul realised Jesus' death was therefore an offering for sin. He concluded that Jesus' motivation must have been love, and as he appeared to Paul it could only be that, 'He loved me and he gave himself for me'. Jesus is not a mere subject for academic study but a person who involves himself with us. He gave his life to secure people's release from sin and he meets them to put it into effect.

That brought certain things to the forefront of Paul's mind. Jesus' sheer grace in giving himself for him. The eternal safety that brought. Jesus' power to save, turning a rebel into a follower. And, that being so, Paul could infer that Jesus would persevere with him to the end.

It leads to complete dedication

Such an experience, or discovery, leads the person to give themselves wholly to Jesus just as he gave himself wholly to them. It cannot be otherwise when we realise the sort of person Jesus is. It cannot be otherwise when we are filled with gratitude to him. We cannot walk away.

Paul used the word 'slave' to describe himself, but without complaint. He acknowledged that Jesus had bought him; but his service was entirely free, he did it because he wanted to serve him.

From then on life was about Christ Jesus. Other things such as his blameless record, his religious achievements, even his nationality, took second place (Philippians 3).

That influenced his way of life – his values and how he practised them. It led him to identify with Christ's people and devote himself to serving them. And it led to specific acts of service as Christ led him. He summed up his outlook in the words, 'You are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and your spirit, which are God's' (1 Corinthians 6:20).

In practice that outlook includes rejecting anything that would come between us and Christ Jesus. Even legitimate things can become idols – that cannot be allowed; truth, and the believer's love for Christ, cannot allow it.

Paul often used the illustration of an athlete to describe the Christian. That includes the self-discipline necessary to train for events. Anything that hinders progress is disposed of. So it is with the Christian.

It develops a relationship

Christ Jesus becomes the most significant person in our life. Other relationships are eclipsed in the sense that he takes first place. That does not lessen the others, indeed our relationship with Christ enhances them.

Communication takes place by the Bible (Christ speaking to us) and prayer (us speaking to him). Like any communication it leads to reflection with the result that our praying may inform us, and his Word produces a response in us.

Part of the relationship consists in his actions and ours. This communication determines our choices. The Bible is Christ guiding, comforting, and motivating. On his part, Christ also acts on the basis of our prayers, desires and actions. His providence and our communication are closely linked.

It influences our spirit and conduct

Christ is an active influence, and not only by means of our communication with him. The 'fear of God' is also the regard we have for Christ. Although we may be spiritually sleepy at times our perception of Christ changes the way we think and act.

We think of his character and remember, 'Be holy, for I am holy' so we fear to sin. We remember his love and the fact that his washing the disciples' feet was an example for all his people to follow. We remember his faith, and we persevere in hope of God's promises being fulfilled.

We think of his grace towards us. It overwhelms us. Gratitude motivates us to serve him, obey him, and make our spirit like his. We 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ'. We remember the parable of the unmerciful servant and the devotion of the woman whose many sins were forgiven.

We treasure his sayings about the future, and the teaching that is based on these. We gain comfort when we remember, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age'. We value heavenly things more than earthly because he said he will come again, even if we have to suffer for his sake. We understand Peter's observation, 'What manner of persons ought you to be, in all holy conduct and godliness' (2 Peter 3:11).

Those who walk with Jesus become like him.

It shapes our expectations

The believer can take what others perceive as great risks, when they are acting on Christ's command and promise. 'We are fools for Christ's sake' (1 Corinthians 4:10).

To the extent we are influenced by regard for Christ we will be afraid of sin because we know what it cost him, and what it can cost us in chastisement and loss on the Day of Judgement.

We pray because we know he is the God of grace and providence. He will answer and act. He will not withhold what is good for those who fear him.

We have expectations for his church, because it is his. He has said, 'I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it' (Matthew 16:18). We also expect opposition, and fear his chastisement if we are not faithful to him.

Those expectations led Paul to 'endure all things for the elect's sake' (2 Timothy 2:10). He was determined to 'press towards the mark for the prize' (Philippians 3:14). When others criticised him he said 'it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court ... he who judges me is the Lord' (1 Corinthians 3:4).

It shapes our expectations of death. Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee of our own. Even that is not the end, for 'we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:10). Consequently we live in such a way that we will 'receive a full reward' (2 John 1:8).

It moves us to please and serve him

For all those reasons and in all those ways we live to please him – that is our aim in life. Paul lived to gather people in to Christ and the kingdom of heaven. For that purpose proclaimed the gospel, planted churches, and built up the believers.

His aim was to present them to Christ at the great Day. 'For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (2 Corinthians 11:12).

Each believer has his or her own path mapped out for them by Christ. The important thing is that we love him and follow him, putting everything else in second place.

Conclusion

The way to live like this is to be with the Lord Jesus as much as possible. Only that regard for him will motivate us, and only his Spirit will enable us. At the end of the day nothing else will seem worthwhile.