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The Relevance of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The words "*Christ shall be magnified in my body*" (Philippians 1:20) not only provide the key to the epistle to the Philippians but also the secret of Paul's radiant and fruitful life. All through the four chapters he took pleasure in expressing his joyful appreciation of the relevance of Christ, and his passionate desire that this might become evident to the Philippians and to all believers, including us. To Paul it did not even matter whether he lived or died, so long as Christ was magnified in that body of his.

We shall consider how the chapters stress four aspects of his experience and enjoyment of Christ, realising that each one of them was written so that his readers might have a share in this rich life.

Christ My Life

The first statement is that Christ was Paul's life - "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). He neither had nor desired anything beyond this, that his very being and existence in the world should provide room for Christ. It amounted to this, that wherever one could find Paul, there the Lord Jesus could also be found, since his one reason for being anywhere was that Christ should use his mortal body for the expression of His Own divine presence. Wherever Paul was, there Christ could be found, with consequent blessing to others, as we would expect.

If Paul's experience is anything to go by we are forced to conclude that there were some extraordinary places in which the Lord Jesus chose to be. Take the Philippian prison! It seems that

Christ wanted to be present in that prison, although to us this might seem most inappropriate. There it was, however for the Lord Jesus has no objection at all to going to prison if thereby eternal interests can be served, so naturally enough Paul must be prepared to go there too. He was, and we know what blessing resulted from that experience. From this chapter we know also that Paul welcomed the hardship of yet another prison - this time in Rome - since by his presence there Christ was able to enlarge His kingdom in the hearts of men. Places of apparent limitation and restriction became places of enlargement and liberation, just because Paul kept true to his commitment that Christ was his life.

The man who talks as Paul did must be prepared to find himself in some strange and unexpected locations, but if he really means what he says the outcome will always be glory for God and the magnifying of Christ, not only in his thought processes but in his actual bodily experiences. This happened as the apostle went from place to place. Christ was there because he was there, so whether it was the inner dungeon at Philippi, lying stoned and left for dead outside the city of Lystra, or fighting with beasts at Ephesus, it was all the same, since clearly Christ was choosing such means for the expression of His presence and powers and this was what Paul wanted.

It seems an audacious claim on the part of the apostle and one which we ourselves would hardly dare to make, for much as we know that Christ is our very life and we are completely dependent on Him, we might feel it presumptuous to suggest that we are taking Him into the many and varied situations of our daily life. Nevertheless if we can say, "For to me to live is Christ" this surely means that so long as fellowship with the Lord is kept clear and uninterrupted, there is no place so dark or difficult, no situation so hard or problematic, but what an opportunity is being provided in our very bodies for the magnifying of Christ.

Of course we realise that Paul had only reached such a position by a complete abandonment of himself to Christ; he had no other interests and no other ambitions, for everything in his life was subjected to the one divine purpose. If we have some alternative to Christ, some side-line of our own interests, some indulgence, some rival to His lordship, then this experience is not for us. In such cases death would clearly involve loss - loss of those personal interests and ambitions. To die is only gain if Christ is all.

Christ My Disposition

The second thing that Christ was to Paul was his "mind" (2:5-9). We are exhorted to have the mind of Christ. This, of course, does not refer to intellect; it is wholly concerned with the attitude of heart. We are told in these verses not how much technical or academic understanding the Lord had but what was His disposition, and we are shown that this disposition was one of perfect meekness. All that was His by right He was willing to let go, humbling Himself to the extreme limit for the glory of God and the help of others. This was His attitude of mind, and the same thing is expected of us, though in any case we have few, if any, rights to let go of.

The apostle was referring to a background situation at Philippi in which two prominent workers were stubbornly holding on to their own positions, each refusing to give way, standing on her own dignity and waiting for the other to apologise. The root sin of all sins is pride. It is the one thing which the Word of God discloses to be an abomination to the Lord, whereas to Him one of the most beautiful things is "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit which is in the sight of God of great price" (1 Peter 3:4).

Without boasting, Paul could truly claim to have imbibed this spirit from his Lord. In the following chapter he tells of his former self glory, and claims that he had more right to boast than most other men, but since Christ was not only his life but also his disposition of mind he had been able gladly to humble himself. He was the man who could say to the Corinthians, "The more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved" and yet still go on gladly spending himself for them (2 Corinthians 12:15). Although in this chapter he had to record how fellow workers had let him down (Philippians 2:20-21), he gave no sign of bitterness but only of praiseful devotion to God's people and readiness to sacrifice himself for them. He it was who urged prayer "for all saints" (Ephesians 6:18), whether they approved of him or not. No doubt in his case, as in ours, it did not come naturally to accept that self-emptying which was so truly a part of Christ's nature, but as he committed himself for this purpose he was led through experiences - often painful ones - of learning to let go of all that was personal for the one end of the glory of God; and so he found that his own selfish disposition was being displaced by that beautiful meekness of Christ.

Christ My Objective

Thirdly, Christ had become Paul's objective. "...that I may gain Christ..." (3:8-9). From the day on the Damascus road when he had a vision of Christ in glory, his whole soul had been captivated. He was then taken in hand by the Holy Spirit and given an ever increasing understanding of Christ's glory which only deepened his single purpose of heart to be "found in Him". He knew now that for this purpose he had been arrested, he had been taken in charge, but far from resenting this experience he now gloried in having been captured and captivated by his wonderful Lord. He went into solitude in Arabia for two years and there the revelation grew, as did also his determination to be wholly committed to Christ. The unfolding of divine truth to him showed that Christ has no desire to remain alone and isolated in His exaltation, but plans to bring redeemed men into fellowship with Himself so that they may be conformed to His image and be partakers of His glory.

This realisation so gripped Paul that it left him with one single objective in life and that was to be "found in Him", to enter into the full purpose which lay behind that arresting vision of the glorified Lord. No wonder he was glad to leave the things which were behind; no wonder that he was always stressing that he had not yet arrived; he had seen, as it were, Christ beckoning him on to share in the eternal glory and found that nothing else mattered beside this marvellous prospect. Christ was his objective.

Christ My Strength

Christ was also Paul's strength (4:13). It is so good that the letter ends on this note, for it reminds us that Christ is the power to make all the rest possible. If we had to provide the resources for triumphant and self-sacrificial living we might well despair, but we do not; what we have to do is to learn to draw on Christ's resources, for they are more than sufficient for every need which can possibly arise.

Just as in Romans 8:28 Paul could rightly rejoice at God's sovereign ability to use "all things" and make them work together for good, so here in Philippians 4:13 he could affirm that "all things" were made possible in his life because of Christ's inward strength. A glance at the context shows that this did not refer so much to the outward activities of Christian service as to a capacity to endure every happening with quiet content in the will of God. Paul was born to be a gentleman but he had to

learn to live as a slave, and this he did by the inward strength of Christ, and did it without the grumbling complaints which so often mar our testimony. He found it quite possible to be abased, put down, walked over, without showing any hurt or resentment. He could do this because Christ was his strength. What is more, he was able to abound, to know prosperity and success, without falling into the peril of losing his walk with God. High positions are more precarious than low ones, popularity more dangerous than persecution. The man who is being used and blessed of God is in special danger, for the moment that any servant of God allows himself to be made much of, is the time when Christ is no longer glorified but rather obscured. Only Christ's inward strength can keep us to our original committal of utter dedication to Himself. Only He can keep up to date, through adversity and prosperity, that first purpose that "as always, so now also, Christ shall be magnified" in these bodies of ours.