

Paul's Estimate of Life

by G. Campbell Morgan

G. Campbell Morgan explores Paul's profound declaration that life is wholly centered on Christ, emphasizing transformation and purpose in the Christian journey.

Scripture: John 15:5, Romans 8:38-39, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 1:21, Colossians 3:4, 2 Timothy 4:7-8, Hebrews 12:1-2

Topics: "Transformation in Christ", "Living For Christ"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the Apostle Paul's profound understanding of life and death, encapsulated in his declaration, 'To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' Paul, writing from prison, reflects on his transformation through Christ, asserting that his entire existence is centered around Him. Morgan explores seven dimensions of this statement, illustrating how Christ is the author, sustainer, law, product, aim, impulse, and crown of Paul's life. The sermon challenges listeners to evaluate their own lives and consider what truly defines their existence, urging them to embrace a life wholly devoted to Christ.

Transcript

In the history of the Christian church perhaps no man, upon whom the eyes of the world have been fixed, has so wondrously fulfilled in character and conduct the ideal of Christianity as did the Apostle Paul. Most of us will agree that he realized more fully than any man of his own time the purposes of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. His life and teaching have revealed the meaning and Christianity in a way accomplished by no other life or teaching. It is very interesting in his letter to the Philippians, one of his later epistles, to find him writing of himself, and yet of himself principally in the new life, which he had then been living for about three and thirty years. He writes with human tenderness, of human sensibilities, and human thoughts, while yet upon all there rests the light of the divine, and through all there is manifested the power that has taken possession of him.

In this epistle, written to his children in the faith at Philippi, it is very evident that he writes under the stress of circumstances. Not that circumstances are causing him one moment's anxiety, but they are such as to compel him to face the alternative possibilities which lie just ahead of him. It is while in this condition that he writes this letter and condenses into one swift burning sentence an epitome of Christianity as he has realized it: "To me to live is Christ."

To this man, all the marvelous unfoldings of the doctrine and scheme of redemption can be condensed and expressed in the simplest of words. He tells the whole story of his own experience of Christianity

when he writes, "To me to live is Christ" (Phil. i. 21). To him Christianity is Christ.

"Christ! I am Christ! and let the name suffice you,

Ay, for me, too, He greatly hath sufficed;

Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,

Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ."

This statement of the apostle's view of Christianity gathers force when we remember the circumstances under which he wrote it. He was a prisoner in charge of the Praetorian guard. He was waiting, most probably, for the final word of the emperor, which should decide in which of two ways his pathway should lie. If the emperor's command be given, the apostle will tread the road through the door of his prison, through the city to the place of execution, and then, by one swift, sudden stroke, his life will end. He looks along that road and thinks of the possibility of traversing it. Then he looks in the other direction. Suppose that the emperor command that he be set at liberty. Then back to Philippi he will speed to see his children, and on to some new region to tell the same story and live the same life and win more trophies for Christ. He looks at these two roads stretching before him, and he says:

"To live--is Christ, and to die--is gain. I am in a strait betwixt two. I desire to depart, and yet for your sakes I would tarry a little longer."

Life and death have lost their old significance to him, because there is one vision that fills the horizon whether he look this way or that. Here it is Christ, and there it is gain, and gain is Christ, and Christ is gain. There is no darkness but only light, for everywhere he sees the Master. That is Christianity.

How, beloved, I want to take that estimate of Christian life and meditate upon it for a little while. Do not expect me to exhaust it, for in this text lie all the possibilities and potentialities of the Christian life.

"To me to live is Christ." What did the apostle mean? There are seven things which he might have meant. By these words he intended to say that:

1. Christ was the author of his life. It was as though he had written, "To me to live at all is Christ."
2. Christ was the sustainer of his life. "To me to continue to live is Christ."
3. Christ was the law of his life. "The conditions in which I live my life are summed up in Christ."
4. Christ was the product of his life. "To me to live is to reproduce Christ."
5. Christ was the aim and influence of his life. "To me to live is to lead men to Christ."
6. Christ was the impulse of his life. "To me to live is to be swept along under the compassion of the Christ."
7. Christ was the finisher, the crown of his life. "To me to live is at last to be what he is, and to find the crowning of all my manhood in him."

Christ the end, as Christ was the beginning. Christ the beginning, and therefore Christ the end. Whether this man looked back upon the past, at the present, or into the future, within or without, behind, above, or

beyond to the consummation--wherever he turned his eyes, he saw Jesus only.

The first thought is that when Paul wrote these words, "To me to live is Christ," he meant to say, "Christ is the author of my life."

This man did not count that he had any life except the life which was named "Christ." He began to reckon his life only from the day when Christ was born within him through the power of the Holy Spirit. In the life of this man, there is one clean line, dividing it about at its center. Behind that line is the old life, the "old man," to which he so often referred, while on the other side of the line is the new life, the "new man." To Paul, the crossing of that line was something that went to the very depths of his being. It transformed him so that in looking back to the days when he became a new man in Christ, he said of the old days, "Old things are passed away." They had all vanished out of his sight. He took no account of anything that was behind him, and he said, "All things are become new," and in the new things he lived. The years that he spent on the earth, prior to the moment when Jesus found him, he did not reckon as worth speaking of for a single moment.

Was Paul not mistaken? Had not very much of value been crowded into the years before his conversion? Stop him for a moment and ask him:

"Paul, what do you mean by this? You lived a very remarkable life before you met Jesus of Nazareth. You had been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel. You had all the advantages of learning and religion. You had never been a profligate. Your life had been straight and pure, clean through. You were a Pharisee of the Pharisees, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. In all outward seeming, and what is infinitely more, in all inward sincerity, you had been a remarkable man."

"Perfectly true; but the things I counted gain, I now count but dross."

"Why?"

"In comparison with what I found, when Christ found me. When I turned my back upon the old, I did it forever, because my face was set toward the new."

I do not think this man ever had five minutes' questioning as to whether he ought to go back into that old life once a week for enjoyment, and live the new life all the remainder of the week as a duty. The old life passed away, and the new life opened before him bright with joy, thrilling with delights, expanding all the way.

The apostle's new life began when there shone a light round about him on the way to Damascus. We learn so much by contrast. Look at him for a moment on the way to Damascus. Remember that he was straight, upright, moral, righteous, sincere to the core of his being; and on his way to Damascus he carried in his hand some very important documents--letters from the high priest. What for? Because in Damascus there was a little company of men and women who were daring to slight the religion of their fathers, singing hymns about this Jesus, Whom the friends of Paul had crucified. If they should go on singing their hymns they would soon undermine the national religion, and Paul was going to put an end to it. So he was riding with the priest's letters in his possession, when a light from heaven fell, and a voice from heaven spoke. Paul fell to the ground, and the man upon the earth said in answer to the voice from heaven:

"Who art Thou, Lord?"

The revelation that came to him must have been the most startling in his life: "I am Jesus Whom thou persecutest."

Now hear the next word and never forget it:

"Lord!"

What a change! Why, this man has joined the church at Damascus before he arrives there! That is all they are doing, calling Jesus Lord, and Paul has done it. Do you not see the radical nature of this change? Do you not see that he has taken the crown of his life from off his own head and has put it on the head of Jesus?

"Lord,"--and what else? "What wilt Thou have me to do?"

That is henceforth the keynote of his life. The music is true to it through all the future; through missionary journeyings, through perils by land and by sea, in prison and among robbers, when suffering persecutions or preaching the gospel of the grace of God, he is always true to the keynote which he struck when he said, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" There his life began. There the old life dropped away, and the new life opened before him; and looking back to that beginning from the jail in Rome, he writes:

"To me to live is Christ."

Life began there, and we may judge how real the change was by asking him a question, which I often think I shall want to ask him when by God's grace I meet him in the glory:

"Paul, you have not forgotten the ride to Damascus?"

"No, I still remember the hour of my apprehending by the Lord."

"But, Paul, what did you do with the high priest's letters?"

Did you ever think of that? I shall want to know some day. They went clean out of his life like everything else of the old life. Old things passed away.

That is when Paul began to live. When is your birthday, my brother? Let me say something for the sake of those who say, "I cannot find my birthday." By a question like that, some trembling soul may be unsettled. The devil is only too glad to take hold of anything whereby he may unsettle any one. If the devil says to you, "You haven't had any birthday," treat him as I do and say, "If I never had one, I will have one now." If Satan is so very particular about a definite date, take this one and say to God right now:

"Here I give my all to thee,

Friends and time and earthly store;

Soul and body, Thine to be,

Wholly Thine forever more."

The Master says, "Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out." We have the date, and any "now" will do; so we will dismiss the devil and pass on. The point is that there is a passing into the new life and a turning of the back upon the old. "To me to live is Christ." Blessed fact of regeneration, to which we owe

everything that comes after it! All the new possibilities which God offers to us are the result of the fact that the Master arrested us and gave us His life, so that old things passed away and all things became new.

But Paul means infinitely more. He means also, "To me to continue to live is Christ." Three and thirty years, or thereabouts, he has been following Jesus, and the music of his life has been running on amid earth's lamentations. The harmonies have been varied, but that has always been the chord of the dominant.

But what does he mean when he says that to him "to continue to live is Christ"?

It is a confession on the part of this man of his own helplessness. He says:

"Here I am after three and thirty years, by the grace of God. I am still living the same life that then began."

"But how?"

"Christ. I have not kept Him; He has kept me. I have not clung to the cross; the Man of the cross has clung to me, which is infinitely better. He has sustained my life during these three and thirty years."

Beloved in Christ, do we sufficiently grasp that great truth for ourselves? Weak, trembling men and women, who have started the Christian life, are crying and wondering how they will hold out. If it is left to you, I will not expect to meet you in the Christian pathway twelve months hence. If it is left to me, I will be a castaway very shortly.

You remember that wonderful figure from the lips of Jesus recorded in the Gospel by John. There Christ says that He is not only the author but the sustainer of life. "I am the vine, ye are the branches." Paraphrase that; put it into other words so as to bring out the inner thought. People have an idea that Jesus meant to say: "I am the main stem of the vine, and you are the branches grafted into Me. Through Me, the main stem, all the forces of life pass into you the branches."

That is very beautiful, but Jesus meant something infinitely stronger.

What did he say? "I am"--not the main stem--"I am the -vine." What is the vine? Root, main stem, branches, leaves, tendrils, fruit--everything. That is the vine. People speak as though the main stem alone was the vine, held up by roots and expressing itself in branches. That is true in a sense, but I like to take this word of Christ's in its simplicity, and therefore in its sublimity. "I am the vine"--the whole of it. What does this mean? "Ye are the branches--part of the vine--and the life of the branch is the life of the vine." In a sense the vine gives its life to the branch, but not as a separate thing. The branch is part of the vine, and the very life that courses through the branch and reproduces itself in fruit is the life of the vine. "To me to live is Christ." His life it is, that sustains me. It is He Himself in me. I am His; He is mine. We are one by a solemn union, a union infinitely beyond anything that metaphor or figure can teach, one with each other, and by that fact of our oneness my life has been sustained. "To me to live is Christ."

I love this third thought: "To me to live is Christ. Christ is the condition of my life; Christ is the law of my life."

That is why Paul was angry with the Galatians. He said to them:

"O foolish Galatians, ye ran well; who hath hindered you?"

How did he say they had been hindered? They were getting back under legalism, into the place where they continually said, "Thou shall not" and "Thou shalt"; and where they were bringing everybody up to the test of forbiddings and permissions, and asking for a rule for everything. Paul said:

"You ran well; what hath hindered you? How is it you are so soon entangled with the yoke of bondage?"

How is it with you, Paul?

"To me to live is Christ; not a set of rules, but a life principle within me; not the conditioning of my days by time-tables and maxims and rules, but the ever-present Christ stretching to the farthest territory of my being, and by His presence there ordering all my life within the bounds of His own sacred will."

Paul lived in the new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, the covenant in which the law should be written no longer upon the table of stone outside a man's personality, but on his heart, so that if a man wanted to know what God would have him do, he need go to no temple, to no priest, to no altar, to no code of rules. He need but to turn himself to silence and quietness and say:

"O strong life of God in Christ within me,

Direct, control, suggest this day

All I design, or do, or say,

That all my powers with all their might,

In thy sole glory may unite."

The man that lived there had a fresh code of ethics every morning, a new list of regulations every moment; and all these came along the impulse of the Christ-life within him. Christ is the law of my life; He conditions my days; He is the author, the sustainer, and the law.

Again, it is as though this man had said: "Christ is the product of my life. To me to live is Christ."

But if a man says that, and there is no manifestation of it, who believes him? Not I. And I am quite sure that this man did not want any one to believe him unless it was perfectly evident in his life.

Suppose that here is a man living a life that is selfish and malicious and proud and critical and unkind, and he says:

"To me to live is Christ."

O man, do not blaspheme! Your life is selfish, your life is malicious, your life is critical, your life is unkind; was Jesus any of these?

"Oh, no," he says, "I do not mean that. I mean that I have accepted His creed."

Never! No man ever really accepted the creed who did not get the Christ first. The creed grows out of the living Christ; and when that is so, the creed is forever manifesting itself in conduct.

Do you not see, beloved, the necessity for this? Nature, so far as we understand it, always reproduces itself true to type. I remember the last season in which I put flowers in my garden in Birmingham, I went

down to a shop and bought some bulbs, because I wanted a fine show of tulips in the earlier days of the year. I put them all carefully in my garden. I even arranged them according to a color scheme, and in geometrical precision. I almost dreamed of the result, for I love God's flowers, though I do not understand them. The winter went; spring came, and the bulbs came up, but they were crocuses. Why? Because I had planted crocus bulbs. I thought I had a bargain, and the result was, that what I had sowed that I reaped.

Now work out that great principle of life and apply to this question of sainthood. If the life implanted in you is the life of Christ, that must reproduce itself true to type. If a man has not quit singing, "I want to be an angel," he is on a sorry business, because he has not even a promise of wings anywhere on him. But if a man is singing reverently, with strong crying and tears and earnest desire, "I want to be like Jesus," that is possible. Why? Because the life he lives, if he is born again, is the Christ-life, and if the life of Christ be implanted within him, it will in its own outworking, reproduce itself, and he will, individually as well as with the Church, grow up into Him in all things which is the head, even Christ.

Let us endeavor to understand this better by looking at two illustrations from Paul's life.

We saw him just now on the way to Damascus. I have the profoundest admiration for Saul of Tarsus before he was converted. I love a man who is sincere and out and out in anything. But do you see what Paul's sincerity did for him in those old days? It made him say, in effect:

"I am sincere, and I am determined that the religion of my God shall be the religion. If men will not bow to it, then I will hail them to prison, and to death. My sincerity arouses my indignation, and I am determined to smite to death the men who will not abide by that which is a divinely revealed religion."

There he is, a magnificent man, the best that human nature can ever do for a man apart from Jesus Christ. Do not forget it.

There has nothing finer been brought out of fallen human nature than Saul of Tarsus before Christ found him.

Thirty years have gone, and now we see him before Agrippa and his friends, who desire to amuse themselves by looking at this strange man, and hearing what he has to say. Paul gives his testimony, tells the story of how Jesus found him and transformed him. Agrippa looking at him, said not, "Almost thou persuadest," but with scorn:

"With a very little would you persuade me to be a Christian?"

What does Paul say? Is he any less sincere and consecrated than he was when he rode to Damascus? No. Is he less enthusiastic? No. Is there any difference? Yes. a vast difference! How does he show it? Manacles are on his wrists, and chains upon his ankles, but he looks into the face of Agrippa and says:

"O King Agrippa, I wish that, not with a very little, but that altogether thou wast such as I am, except these bonds. I do not want you to wear my chains, Agrippa. Have my Christ, have my light, have my life, but I would not put these on even you, Agrippa."

Do you see any change in the man? Perfectly sincere thirty years ago, but if you did not agree with him he would put you to death. Perfectly sincere now, but with an entirely changed tone:

"O King Agrippa, if you could only change places with me without having my chains; but I would not harm or pain you for a moment!"

If a man lives Christ, he reproduces Christ. Is not that what Paul has done? Are not his words the living echo of that most wondrous prayer of all, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do"? Men always in some measure reproduce Christ when they live His life. If the Christ-life is present it must come out through the glory on the face, and the tenderness of the touch, and the new love for everybody. The very best testimony that you can ever give to the power of Jesus Christ is to live His life over again, not in your own effort, but by the propulsion of that same life within you. "For me to live is to reproduce Christ."

Let me mention the other points briefly. "To me to live is to influence men toward Christ. The aim of my life is Christ"

Do you think that many of those soldiers that were fastened to Paul got away without being influenced for Christ? I do not. Every soul he came into contact with was an opportunity; and all his life, so far as active service went, was poured out in the doing of this one thing: the bringing of men who had never seen the Christ into the place where they might see Him; and the building up of those who had seen Him in their most holy faith from height to height, and from glory unto glory. The whole aim and influence of his life was Christ.

Again, the impulse of his life was Christ.

I use the word "impulse" in reference to the great force behind it, which impelled him to service. Take one illustration. You know the epistle to the Romans,—that is, you know where it is. Well, read it again. You have never fathomed it yet. I am just beginning to see light upon it, beauteous gleams of glory on it. Chapter five, justification; six, the question of sin; seven, that question still discussed; eight, no condemnation, the larger, purer life; nine, what there? Well, do not read the ninth without reading the last verses of the eighth. What is the highest height of experience in the eighth? "For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I always think of the apostle here as on some mountain eminence, looking at his enemies. They are all around him—death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present; and then his imagination sweeps him into all the infinite possibilities of the future—things to come, height, depth, or any other creation. There they all are, the possibilities of danger. He says, "I am persuaded that none of them shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus." There he is at the height of vision, the height of experience.

What next? "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow."

Why, the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth verses of the eighth chapter do not sound like that! They are a shout of triumph, "Nothing can separate me from His love, but I have great heaviness and continual sorrow."

What about? About himself? No; self had perished in the struggle of these preceding chapters. What about? "I would wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." What is that? That is, "To me to live is Christ. The impulse of my life is the Christ impulse. The

passion that brought Him down to redeem men, consumes me, and when I have touched the highest height of His life so that I know that nothing can separate me from His love, then I have learned the deepest experience of all, that of fellowship in His suffering, and I wish I could be accursed." Jesus Himself was made a curse for us, and Paul is living the Christ-life, so that he can say,

"Oft, when the Word is on me to deliver.

Lifts the illusion and the truth lies bare.

Desert or throng, the city or the river,

Melts in a lucid paradise of air.

Only like souls I see the folk thereunder

Bound who should conquer, slaves who should be kings,

Hearing their one hope with an empty wonder,

Sadly contented in a show of things;

Then with a rush the intolerable craving

Shivers throughout me like a trumpet call,

Oh, to save these, to perish for their saving,

Die for their life, be offered for them all!"

Let commentators cease their foolish attempts to explain away those verses. Paul has come nearer to Jesus Christ here than ever before. This impulse of the Christ-life which wrought redemption for the race at the cost of His own life enters a human soul, and floods it to overflowing, until he says:

"I could wish that even I were accursed for my brethren's sake."

What is the last thing? Christ is the crown. He is not only the author; He is the finisher. He not only began; He will end the good work.

And when it ends, what is it? Christ. What is the music of the land to come? Christ. What the fellowship? Christ, and Christ reproduced in the saints. What will be my chief joy when I look again in the face of my child who has gone before me and is to wait for me in the shining city? It will be that she is like Jesus. Not only shall we see Christ Himself, but Christ reproduced in the loved ones.

Imagination is sometimes ahead of truth. Poetry guesses at more than prose ever fathoms. Follow out the thought, and everywhere, on the throne, and amid the multitudes, what see you? Christ. That is why this man Paul stands and notwithstanding Nero's threatened axe, says:

"To die is gain."

"Do you not see that executioner, Paul?"

"No, I do not see him,"

"What do you see?"

"Christ! To die is gain."

Now let me ask you to finish this theme for yourself. Imagine that you have in your hand a clean piece of paper, and write on it for yourself--God help you!--take the pencil and write! Write the story of your life, honestly, faithfully, truly, in as brief a sentence as Paul wrote the story of his. Write:

"To me to live is money."

Now, be honest, in God's name. If you have played the hypocrite before, do not do it now. Write it down, not for man's eyes, but for God's.

"To me to live is money." If that is true, put it down.

"To me to live is pleasure."

"To me to live is fame."

Oh, fill them in for yourself!

Now you have it written, your life's story. You never looked it squarely in the face like that before. There it is, right in front of you, the self-evident truth, the inner meaning of all your life.

Now finish it. Write under it what Paul did. That is your estimate of life; now add Paul's estimate of death:

"To me to live is money; to die is--I cannot write 'gain' after that. To die is loss. I shall leave it all. Naked came I out of my mother's womb; naked shall I return thereunto."

"To me to live is pleasure; to die--oh! do not talk to me about death! It is the last thing I want to think about. I want my pleasure, my laughter, this hollow crackling of thorns under a pot; 'tis all I have! Let me have it, but in God's name do not talk about death. Why, man, I do not like to walk down the street in the dark because I think of death. I cannot write that."

"To me to live is fame." Now, finish it. "And to die--no, I cannot. For if they put my name on a marble monument, directly it is erected, nature, with mossy fingers, will begin to pull it down. I cannot write that. To die is to perish, to be forgotten! What is fame when I am gone? I cannot write it."

No, beloved, and you cannot write Paul's estimate of death after anything except Paul's estimate of life. If, by God's great grace, you can write, "To me to live is Christ," you can write, "To die is gain." To die is to see Him more clearly, to be closer to Him, to enter into larger service for Him, to touch the height and the depth and the length and the breadth of His life; "to die is gain." You can only write it if you write the first.

Somebody else says: "Well, I have never written the first; can I start?"

Yes.

"Where can I start?"

Where he started.

"Where did he start?"

"Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" That is it. Will you say that?

"Yes, we will do it. Is it easy?"

No, it is not easy. The cross is there, crucifixion is there, the ending of self is there, the abandoning of everything, of hope, and wife, and child, and home, and friends, and ambition, all is there. "Lord--I have had other lords--Lord, I have been governed by self, I have been governed by human loves, I have been mastered by passions, I have been swept along by ambitions; Lord, Nazarene, depose these other lords and be King."

That is the place to begin; and there is not a man or woman who begins there honestly to whom He will not come with healing on His wings, the sun rising; then the old things for you shall pass away, and all things shall become new.

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