

THE LIFE I NOW LIVE

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is bigger than Paul, and Paul knows it. Paul knows himself to be a tiny part of the vast drama that God has undertaken, a drama in which God will win the frightened and erring children of the earth back to God – to peace, and love, and the true destiny for which they were each created. Not an easy task. It requires the transformation of every single human life. You cannot just put something in the water, or put everybody into a generic program. It requires the transformation of each and every human life, one at a time – each person coming into a personal relationship with God. Who but God would dream of undertaking such a thing? And of course, humans cannot imagine it, so they keep trying to turn it back into something more institutional; something en masse; something where “one size fits all” and we can all get processed much faster by believing the same thing in the same way, responding to it in three simple steps, and that will be the end of it. Of course, when we try to do it that way, it IS the end of it. You cannot mix the Gospel with the goose-step.

But we are so afraid that the Risen Christ is not really here – that the Holy Spirit will not speak to our kids or our neighbors fast enough or loud enough to avert all the disasters – so we keep trying to “improve things,” streamline things, speed it up, make it so nobody can miss it ... just like Satan has always done. Pretty soon it’s hard to tell the difference between “Youth for Christ” and the “Hitler Youth Movement.” The names have changed, but the techniques are the same.

Paul is rabbinically trained. He does not see Jesus as a brand-new, unheard-of theme or effort on God’s part. For Paul, Jesus is the culmination of what God has always been about. The same God has been moving toward the same purpose all through history: with Adam, in Noah, with Abraham, in Moses, in the prophets. Always God has been at work to bring Creation to completion: to win it back because it has gone astray; to save it because it has rebelled and is headed toward destruction. Only, it IS a winning – a persuasion, an invitation, a calling. God will not cheat. Coercion does not count. Always, Adam (humankind) can choose: choose to go further “away,” OR choose to hear the call and head for home – to draw closer to God. You hear that call every day, don’t you? So do I. And every day, all day long, we decide whether to do it our way – go it alone – or to let God back in. Shall we be strong and independent

and do things our own way, or shall we be wimps and let God help us with our lives?

Paul sees Jesus as a startling new move on God's part to get on with what God has always been doing – an effort to gain the trust, loyalty, and maybe even a little understanding from the children. The Cross and the Resurrection are for RECONCILIATION, that the true Kingdom (real LIFE) may be known and chosen. For it must be CHOSEN. Even Cross and Resurrection are done in such a way that they do not take away the choosing. Jesus does not repeal the Garden of Eden story. He adds the Garden of Gethsemane story to it. But Adam and Eve choose – and keep on choosing – throughout all history. Why is it so terrifying to raise children, or to love *anybody*? It is terrifying because we can all make wrong choices, and frequently do. We keep looking for some way to take that part out of life. We keep wanting to find a way to raise our children so they cannot make wrong choices. And that keeps turning out to be one of our own worst choices. There is no escaping the Prime Directive – the decision of God never to do anything that would destroy our free will.

Jesus makes it possible for us to keep undoing past choices – to re-choose. It is a thing so incredible, we barely dare to believe it. So we keep trying to turn Jesus into a different Messiah: a Messiah who will not let us make mistakes; a Messiah who makes us all perfect, or who dusts us off once and then keeps us perfect ever after. Only, perfect means you cannot grow, learn, or change. Jesus will have none of that. What has perfection got to do with things like mercy, grace, love, forgiveness, redemption, salvation, repentance? There is no room in the Christian language for “perfection.” Jesus makes it possible for us to keep undoing past choices – to re-choose. If you are happy and content with yourself the way you are, this is no place for you. We are not good enough for you. You will be finding faults and imperfections as if that were some kind of surprise, or as if you had a right to expect better. Or you will want us to be about helping others as if there were no need for us to get any help ourselves. The truth is that the only help we have for others is the same help we need and are getting for ourselves.

Of course, we all understand the longing for perfection. Discouraged beyond belief with our poor and wrong choices, and the poor and wrong choices going on all around us, we have dreamed/prayed/hoped/begged that God would come and usurp the choices – start making the choices

for us. It has been pictured and hoped for with such poignant longing that we can hardly stand it: The GREAT DAY OF THE LORD. The MESSIANIC AGE. The COMING OF THE MESSIAH. The SECOND COMING. Always we long for some huge dramatic time when God will come and take the choices away, force the conclusion, right all the wrongs, set everything right – and it will have nothing to do with us. We can just lie back and watch it happen, and nothing can stop it and nobody can do anything about it – there will be no choice. And that is the key to our apocalyptic dreams and errors: we long for the day when it will all be taken out of our hands.

So we go from Eden, to Canaan, to Passover, to Easter, to Pentecost, partially realizing each time that what is required is a turning: a returning, a repentance, a re-choosing ... a giving of our hearts and lives to God that will transform us – that will change our reasons for everything we do, as well as our methods, our goals, and our values. But each time we start down this inner road, we quickly talk our way back out of it. Better to work on others than to seek conversion for ourselves. Better to be the pastor of a church or a member of a church than to BE the church. Better to do good for others than to confront our own inner being. How long do we have to help others before it turns into a reconciliation between us and God? Do we think there is no difference between a Cross and a handout? So instead we dream of some dramatic outer event, when God will come, with sword flashing, and kill all the bad guys, then set things up so it won't be unpleasant for the good guys anymore.

Where do we think the good guys come from? How long has it been since you thought a bad thought, said a mean thing, did a deed you were not proud of? I have never made it through one single twenty-four-hour period without doing or thinking something that would not be worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now, I realize that I'm a lot worse than most of you, since I didn't grow up with perfect parents, friends, or teachers, but where do we think the good guys come from? There *are* no good guys, only forgiven bad guys – redeemed, loved, changed and changing bad guys. Just like there are no bad guys, only hurt, lost, confused, frightened good guys.

So what does it mean when we start thinking in common, familiar terms about who is in and who is out – who is in the Kingdom, who is in the church, who gets into Heaven ... and who is kept out? It means we don't get it yet! Jesus comes for sinners. The good guys are already in Hell

because they cannot grow or learn or change – they cannot get along with anybody but themselves. The Kingdom is for bad guys who are being forgiven, saved, redeemed, healed, loved – and who love it when that happens for anybody else. They don't have any real help to give to anybody; they just know where the help comes from, and how huge and unending it really is. Remember D.T. Niles? "True evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find food."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is bigger than Paul, and Paul knows it. But however big the Gospel, and however great the Christ of God, Paul is also able to connect with it. However small a part, he is a part of it now. And in this tail end of chapter two, Paul's personal involvement gets pretty clear. He is not the Gospel; what happens to him does not make or break the Gospel. Only, he has *felt* the transformation. He feels it working within him still. And he tries to put into words a taste – a hint – of what that has seemed like and felt like in his own experience. I thought we might try to track that together, for a little while.

THE LIFE I NOW LIVE

Start out with the sermon title, a quote from verse twenty. An interesting phrase, don't you think? THE LIFE I NOW LIVE. We will now take a two-hour recess and each of us will write an essay on "The life I now live," and then we will reconvene and read our essays to each other. Wouldn't that be a marvelous way to spend the Lord's Day? A supplement to Galatians, chapter two: We know about Paul – what about us? What is the life *we* now live? What was it like before? What forces have changed us? What are we living for now, and how? Has Jesus made any real difference for us? Oh, it's easy to be magnanimous and inclusive and accepting of other religions, if you have never really tasted your own. Has Jesus made any real difference in you?

Such a question is still bound to be mixed with light and shadow. The life I now live is not what I dreamed or expected it would be, by this time in my life. My memories are clouded with events, people, and choices that are unlike anything I imagined when I was planning my future back in my teens and twenties. Life comes in more dimensions than I could possibly have realized back then. To be fair, a lot of it has not been my fault, both the good and the bad. But some of it has been. Often, with God's help, I have given better than I have received. Often I have received more than I was able to give. Seldom have I knowingly returned evil for

good. But what I have tried to do has often turned out to be less beneficial than what I intended – or, to be straight, evil has come from it. Many of you do not believe in Satan or the dark powers, but something stalks this life looking for ways to ruin what God blesses.

To be frank, there was a time when I expected to end up in a much larger church, to have a much wider influence, to be a stronger force for the Christian Faith. I thought perhaps I would be a major voice in our denomination, but I also assumed that our denomination would grow and increase its influence these past forty years, instead of shrinking and shriveling. I am simply saying that the life I now live is not what I once expected to live. I have not done well, by my former lights. And yet, on the levels I care about most, my life is far better than I ever imagined. Surely no fault of mine.

What about the life *you* live? Has any Christ come to change your goals and values, or to pull you out of dark pits or dead ends? Have your values or priorities changed much as the years have gone by? What is the life you now live? Do you like what you live for? What you serve? Where your hope is? The ways in which you love and find love? Oh, I do earnestly hope so. If not, the Christ still invites. Jesus is about undoing past choices, making it possible for us to re-choose.

I HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Whatever does Paul mean? We cannot escape it, can we? Paul is just sitting somewhere, writing this letter to some friends. Yet he makes this astounding claim to have gone through the most amazing experience in earth history. *“I have been crucified with Christ.”* (Galatians 2:20) (If some of you treat this passage the way I have seen you try to treat some other passages, I wonder what images dance in your heads.)

We know from many passages that the early church considered all Christians to “have been crucified with Christ.” In some interior way, symbolized in baptism and experienced as rebirth or conversion, we Christians share an experience of having our lives turned around and realigned, and in a way so profound that we know something old has died, and something new has come to life within us. That is, we have had a taste of the *principle* that governs and defines the entire Christian WAY of Life – the principle that operates the pilgrimage we are on. It is the principle behind the hope and faith by which we walk and in which we trust: DEATH AND RESURRECTION. For us, everything that happens is

somewhere between Cross and Resurrection. Every one of you, no matter what phase or cycle of life you are in or what you are facing, is somewhere between Good Friday and Easter. You have died to the old, but the new is still being born.

Endless words are used, and none are sufficient. This doesn't matter, except that we need to keep speaking of it somehow. *"I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me; and my present mortal life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."*

I don't have any complaints with the way Paul says it. But I still have to make sure I comprehend. What has died? Some say the ego. Well, that's not my language, and my ego has not died. Nor would I willingly destroy that which God has made. But faith in my own power – *that* has died. Confidence in my old ways of "making it" has shattered. I do not believe in them anymore. I don't think that getting more money or better sex or more personal power or greater influence will make me into the person I long to become. I don't think it will "save" me, make me happy, or help me to accomplish what my soul truly and deeply longs for. The old beliefs die hard, like any deep habit, but they die because they have let me down once too often.

I no longer believe that property, position, or being a great parent, an outstanding spouse, or a good minister will "make it" for me, nor will any of these mean that I have "made it." It will not "save" me, or fill the empty places in my soul, or give me any clue to who I am or why I am here (or why my spouse or my children or you are here, either). Do I feel superior to others who are still counting on such things? No – my memory is too good. I know how it feels to try to believe that if I just tweak it one more time, it will work. If we just pull the lever one more time, the machine is bound to pay off. I do not believe it anymore, but I still remember how it feels to believe it.

I might even still pull the lever – I just know that if it pays off, it won't mean what I used to hope it would mean. Sex and money are part of our reality; for a few more days I still have some property and a little position; I am still a parent and a spouse and a minister. These are part of life and can be wonderful in their own right, but I have died to them. They are not where my security lies – not anymore. Even being "good," being moral – trying to behave in ways that God or society would approve

of – that is not my security system anymore. That is not going to “save” me. Even if I could shake all my imperfections and do everything really right, it still wouldn’t cut the loneliness, give me identity, give my life meaning, or carry me through death. Morality still exists, and I want to be a “good” and moral person in the ways that match what I think God wants of us. But that performance is not where my security lies. I have died to it.

I don’t mean to imply that we can describe all the mystery of the Cross, but in the times when I have felt drawn into it – when I have known the reality of it to be nearer than time and space – something has always “snapped” inside me. *All* of life as I have previously tried to understand it no longer matters, no longer holds true. The vertigo is enormous. The despair – *the loss of all hope* – plays peek-a-boo with a new hope: a new light beyond anything our world has ever known or tried to teach.

When Jesus died the way He died ... when it truly dawns on us *how* He died – that is, if this world (us, them, those who live and believe like we do) killed Him – *if we killed Jesus* – well, then, all my hope and security are slain with Him. You see, I thought the world would get better if we all tried hard to be better. Maybe we could work harder, try harder, make better rules, be more conscientious about keeping and enforcing the rules. But it was all nailed to that Cross. Every last shred of it. Being “good” is just as dangerous as being bad. In lots of ways, it’s *more* dangerous, and it makes us even more vulnerable.

God may love the good – and that which is of God within us does love the good – but this world does not love the good. This broken, alienated world hates good even more than evil. Why do you think Jesus kept telling us to do our good deeds in secret, and kept begging the people He helped to keep quiet about it? The very truth and love which Jesus embodied clarified and *demonstrated* the highest aspirations and longings of our souls. He was what we say we want to be like – what we wish other people were like. He was what our world has always pretended we all want to be like – what we want to move toward and work for. And all of it was nailed to that Cross – every last shred of it.

All old security is gone. All former hope has been emptied. Everything I ever thought or hoped might help me to “make it” has all been shattered. Every piece of old truth was connected to this belief that I wasn’t good enough but that if I could get better – be better – things

would improve. And that if I got *really* good, life would be wonderful here. Lies! All lies! I have seen die ONE who was better than any human I could ever have imagined. All old truth died with Him. Oh yes, dear Paul, we also have been crucified with Christ.

And the life we now live? It's the same old world, but we are not the same old people. Security is no longer based in this realm. I am a "foreigner" here in the most absolute way possible. I expect nothing that is linked to this world or its systems to last or matter. My identity is not here, my aspirations are not here – and my true hopes for you are not here, either. In the old language, we belong to a different King, and to a different Kingdom.

Some think this sounds grim. And it would be, except "awakening" is not the only thing that goes *snap* at that Cross. From it also flows a LOVE of unspeakable magnitude and power. The touch of it fills voids and brings a security that none of the earth's blessings can touch or imagine. *That* is what is going to save us. *That* is what has been holding and sustaining us since long before we were aware – since long before we understood any of it. And that is what will go on tracking us through all the life and death that is still to come: this strange, unearthly power we call "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."