

~Other Speakers G-L: Martyn-Lloyd Jones:

WWe stand here face to face with one of the sublimest and greatest statements ever made, even by this mighty Apostle of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. There is a sense in which anyone who faces this verse must feel that he stands on very sacred ground. Indeed, I am ready to admit that I would almost regard it as sacrilege to approach a verse like this in an unworthy manner. Here we have not only the statement of an experience which was true, which was a fact and a reality, but at the same time, and for that reason, we also find ourselves face to face with a standard of judgment. Any God-given experience is sacred, and nothing is further removed from the spirit of the New Testament than approaching a statement like this in a purely objective manner, handling it with our rough hands, bringing our critical or dissecting apparatus to bear upon it. There is something so sublime about it, so delicate and pure, that one is - as always with such verses - confronted with a kind of dilemma. On the one hand, one is afraid of handling it in a detached, so-called scientific manner yet, on the other hand, of course, there is also the danger that, if we do not analyse it up to a point, we fail to realise its inner meaning and its true purpose. One is compelled to do both - to analyse it and try to understand it, while always remembering that it is a living experience and a statement of fact which puts us under judgment.

Now Paul, as we have seen, is comforting the Philippians who were concerned and troubled about him. He has told them how this imprisonment of his has turned out 'rather unto the furtherance of the gospel', and added, you remember, that it was his earnest expectation and hope 'that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.' That is the background of the statement. Paul means that as far as he is concerned, it is immaterial whether he is to be put to death, or whether he is to go on living. The two possibilities are there and he does not know which it is going to be, but, he says, it is all right. He is not concerned and they need not be either, for, 'to me to live is Christ and to die is gain'. And then he proceeds to work it out a little further, for he says that if he were to express his own personal preference, it would be to depart, yet for their sakes it is better for him to remain. At this point, however, we are concerned with this particular statement that the Apostle makes with respect to life and to the meaning of living.

In these words we are surely brought face to face with the most important questions that can ever confront us - What is life? What is living? What does it mean to us? What is it all about? Is it not one of the major tragedies of life, indeed, is it not the greatest of all tragedies, that amid all our concerns about life, all our intellectual activity, all our discussions, the one thing which men and women are never concerned to face is the first and most obvious thing of all, namely life itself, and living. Not only is this a most important question in itself, but I want to go further and point out (and this, indeed, is especially the burden of this study) that here we stand face to face with the most thorough test we can ever encounter of our profession of the Christian faith. Because, of course, this is a word which is more or less meaningless to someone who is not a Christian. It speaks especially to those who claim to be Christians, and that is why I am so anxious not to deal with this subject in an objective manner.

The temptation at this point, of course, is to look at it as Paul's experience only, but, my dear friends, we are speaking about ourselves, not just about Paul. It is true of Paul first and foremost, but what is true about Paul should be true of every other Christian. The last man to recognise any essential difference between himself and every other Christian was the Apostle Paul. He never claimed that there was one kind of Christianity for him and another kind for everybody else. To me, one of the most subtle dangers confronting most of us is that for some extraordinary reason, though we have been Protestants and have rejoiced in Protestantism for 400 years, we still seem to appropriate some of those false Roman Catholic distinctions between Christians and non-Christians. We have seen how they draw an essential difference between saints and ordinary Christians. The saints, they say, are special people, or 'spiritual Christians', as opposed to 'worldly Christians', and that is why they ask these worldly Christians to pray to the saints. But that is a distinction which is never recognised in the New Testament; indeed, it is a distinction which it denounces.

Of course, we recognise that there are differences in gifts and in offices; you see that in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 and in other places in Scripture. But while there are differences in the ministries that are given to Christians by the Holy Spirit, as children of God, through Jesus Christ, we are all the same and all our lives must show this. That is why the Apostle talks so constantly about 'we'. What is true of him is true of others, and here in this statement we are faced with the most searching and thorough test which we can ever apply to ourselves. Can we say honestly with this man that to us living means Christ? Is that true of us? I have no doubt at all but that the greatest thing in the Church and therefore in the world today is that Christian people should be able to say that. It is when they have spoken like this that they have counted in this world; it is when they have been consumed by this passion for their Lord that their very lives are radiant and the whole world has

known that something has happened to them.

So let us look at these words first in terms of the Apostle's own experience, and then let us apply them to ourselves. There Paul is in prison and he raises this problem. 'I may live another twenty years,' he says in effect, 'or I may be put to death tomorrow. But you know,' he continues, 'I find myself in such a state and condition that really it is immaterial to me, because if I am going to live another twenty years that means Christ, and if I am going to be put to death at once, it still means Christ; whichever it is to be, it comes to the same thing. Christ means living, living means Christ.' I repeat, the vital question for us all is whether we can say the same. Paul here makes a vital, fundamental distinction between those who are Christians and those who are not and the thing that characterises the Christian is that to him living means Christ.

What, then, is life? What is living? Perhaps the best way of approaching this is to consider some of the answers that have been given to this question. Now there are, of course, large numbers of people who never think at all about the meaning of life. Life to them just means existence, a kind of animal condition, or a state almost like that of a plant or flower. There are many people who have no philosophy whatever. Here they are in this amazing thing called life; they have this astounding gift of being, and yet they go through without contemplating it. They never stop to ask what it means, they just go on from day to day, eating and drinking, without any such thoughts at all.

Then there is what we might well call the Epicurean view of life, which can best be summed up by the phrase: 'Let us eat, drink and be merry.' The Epicurean attitude to life was very familiar in the time of Paul, as, indeed, it is today. It centres on the living rather than on the life; it means pleasure: eating, drinking, dancing, or whatever it may be. Now there is a very definite philosophy which covers that kind of life and there are people who really believe in it. I do not want to tarry with these preliminary considerations but it is amazing to notice the numbers of people who, if they answered honestly, would have to say that to them that is life - that round of one pleasure after another. It is tragic, but it is true. How often have we heard of people leaving the provinces and going to live in the big cities because they want to see 'life'. They pity the people whom they have left behind because life to them means an opportunity for pleasure.

But there is another view which we may describe as the Stoic's view of life. It is more intelligent than the Epicurean's and it expresses itself like this: life is something which has to be endured. The Stoic does not keep a perpetual grin on his face and say: 'Isn't everything wonderful?' He is sufficiently intelligent to see that that is far from true. He has come to realise that this world can often be filled with tears; he sees the harshness and the wretchedness, the suffering and the torment, and he decides that living means putting up with it, going on with it, going through with it, taking yourself in hand and carrying on, whatever may come. His attitude to life and living means hard endurance, a determination to hold on. And, alas, there are large numbers, who, if you were to ask them what living is all about, would have to say that it is a battle with circumstance and chance; a standing up to the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'; an everlasting and endless struggle.

And then today, and always in times like this, when life is particularly difficult, there is the cynic's view of life. Perhaps one of the best expressions of this is the speech that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Macbeth:

Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

That is what I mean by the cynic's view of life, and how many there are who take that view today! It is perhaps a peculiar temptation in a time like this, when so much idealism has been falsified and so many bright hopes have been dashed to the ground. The typical comment of men today is: What is the use of anything? Nothing.

Then, to advance up the scale, there is the view that may be described as the mystic's view of life. It is important that we should understand this, because oftentimes the Christian view has been mistaken for what I am describing as that of the mystic. There is, of course, such a thing as Christian mysticism, and it is important that this should always be qualified by the word 'Christian', to make it clear. The typical mystic's view is that life and all its ills are ultimately due to the flesh, and that salvation is to be found by going out of the flesh and not being identified with it. Consequently, the mystic spends his time in trying to mortify the flesh; he tries to live in a passive manner, not allowing the world to influence or affect him. That is his outlook, a kind of dying to the world and adopting a purely passive attitude.

But let me now go on to what I would describe as the average man's view of life and this is where the word of the Apostle tests us so profoundly. Christian people, members of Christian churches, if we were asked, 'What is living to you? What really constitutes life to you? What is the thing of all things to which you hold?' is it not true that many of us would have to admit and confess that it means our families, our homes, our work, our occupations, our activities in life? Does not living often mean to many of us the companionship and love of our loved ones, the home life and circle? What precious things these are, yes, but they often become the thing in life, and when they are taken from us, our life, our world, collapses and we have nothing left. I always feel one of the most difficult tasks that we ever have to do is write a letter of sympathy when a dear one has been taken from a family which we know is not Christian. They are good people perhaps, nice people, living a perfectly moral and very happy life, but when one of them is taken you know that the whole basis of their life has gone.

But let me go on. There is the humanist's view. To the humanist living means an opportunity of doing good, of improving the world and uplifting the state of society. Now there are large numbers of people who have that idealistic view of life, and if you ask them what they mean by living, they say, 'It is an opportunity of changing and improving the life of mankind, and of elevating it.'

Then let us go on to what we may call the religious view of life, and I am putting it like this to differentiate it from the Christian view. There are some people, who, if you ask them, 'What is life?' are bound to say that it means being religious and performing religious duties. Let us examine ourselves, my dear friends. One of the greatest dangers facing preachers is the danger that they will live on their own activity: speaking, preaching, being engaged in church work, being very active about their religion. There is a danger of living on all this until suddenly, when the activity is gone, one is left empty-handed. Have you not seen that? To me, it is one of the great tragedies of life. Sometimes, I have to talk to men and women who have led very active lives in church circles and who, when they have been taken ill, seem to have nothing left to them. They have been living on their own activity and interests, and there is a danger of substituting these things for this about which Paul speaks.

Shall I go further and put it like this: living, to the Christian does not even mean God. Is that irreverent, or extreme? Is that going too far? I suggest it is not. A Jew or a Muslim can say quite honestly that life to him means God, and there are many in the world who can say that God is the centre of their lives. So that in this statement of Paul's it is the specific Christian language, that is the distinguishing mark of the Christian. 'To me, to live is' - what? - 'Christ'. Not God even, not God the Father, but Christ the Son; not my religious interests, not my religious activities, not any of the things I have mentioned: to me, says Paul, living is Christ.

What, then, does he mean by life? In a sense, I have already been defining it - it is love. He means the supreme thing in life, the thing for which and by which he lives, the thing without which life would to him be pointless and meaningless. He means the thing that controls the whole of his life. Perhaps the best way of putting it is like this: the thing that Paul is really saying about himself is that he is in love with Christ. He loves him and, as is always true of love, that love dominates his life and controls it. That is what I live for, he says, that is the nature and object of it all.

Now let me analyse that just a little further in order that I may bring home to us just what Paul means when he says that Christ controls the whole of his life. What is life? One good classification is that life consists of what we do. Let us put it like this. The Apostle there in prison says to himself, I may live another twenty years; but what if I do? What is it going to mean? What am I going to do during those twenty years? To us it may mean ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years, perhaps, ahead of us, and what are we going to do with them? What is life going to mean to us? That is the first thing.

And this, again, is something that can be sub-divided. Life consists of what I think and the realm of my interests. Life does not just mean eating and drinking and sleeping and rising and doing my work or job in life. That is not what Paul means by life. He means a purpose in life, the things that give it real meaning. He is referring to how I spend most of my time when I have my leisure, what I read and what I think about. That is a very good test. It is, of course, a characteristic of love that it is always thinking about the object of its love, and, whether we like it or not, that is true of every one of us. That is why this text comes as such a test, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also' (Matt. 6:21). What do we think about? What are our real interests? What is the thing that we are anxious about more and more? Well, with Paul it was Christ: it was always Christ in the centre.

And there is more. Love consists of this - expressing our feelings, expressing our emotions and giving vent to the desires that are within us. And you remember how Paul tells us so clearly that his one desire was to know Christ better and to love him more. That, he tells us in chapter 3, is what he longs for: 'That I may know him, and

the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings'; that, above everything else. He has this feeling, this impulse, this emotion and it is all centered in Christ. 'To me to live', in the matter of feeling and emotion, 'is Christ.'

And then it means activity, action. And here again the Apostle tells us what that means to him. He has spent his time in spreading the glory of Christ, so that Christ may be preached, whether by him or by someone else. That is why he is willing to stay with the Philippians - in order that he may tell them more about Christ. If I remain another twenty years, he says, what am I going to do? Well, as far as I am concerned, I am just going to preach Christ. I am going to tell people about him and try to get them to believe on him; I am going to do everything to make his name great and grand and glorious. Living is activity, in that sense.

But the other thing that is true about living is that things happen to us in life. If I live another twenty years I am going to do certain things, and certain things are going to happen to me; it is a part of life. And here again Paul says that in that respect also, that to him life means Christ. Has he not already been saying that? Was that not what he said in verses 12-30? These people are trying to add to my bonds by preaching Christ of envy, but it is all right, Christ covers that too. Paul sees even a thing like that in terms of, and in the light of, Christ. What he means is that in Christ he has been delivered from the thralldom of things that happen. He is no longer a victim of circumstance and chance. He goes on in the last chapter to say, 'I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content.' Christ has delivered him from the tyranny of what might happen to him.

And the other thing, of course, about love and life is that we all desire satisfaction. There are certain demands I make of life, there are certain things I am looking for. I am looking for peace and joy, I am looking for happiness, and Christ completely satisfies Paul in every respect. I have intellect: Christ satisfies it, says Paul; I have feelings and desires which need satisfaction: Christ is my all and in all. Every demand that I make of life is more than fully satisfied in Christ. That is what he means by saying that living to him is Christ. The action, reaction if you like, to things that happen and all the demands of his nature and his personality are fully satisfied and filled. My dear friend, can you say the same thing? I am sorely tempted just to stop at this point and go on asking that question. This, to me, is the very essence of the Christian position. The thing that makes a person a Christian is Christ. Christ is always central, he is everything to me. 'Living' to Paul meant Christ in all that full sense.

Let me ask another question. What was it that made Paul feel this? I think he gives us the answer in the various epistles he has written. I am quite sure that the first thing was the glory of the Person. In Acts 9 we read the story of his going down to Damascus, breathing out threatenings and slaughter. Paul said within himself, I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He did not know him, but then he saw him, and, if I may use such an expression, Paul fell in love with him, he never forgot the face or the sight. Once he had seen him, everything else receded. Everything else paled into insignificance beside the face of Christ, the glory of the person, the blessed one. Ah, if we have ever seen him, even by the eye of faith, for a second, it must lead to this consuming passion! Paul had seen him and therefore inevitably loved him. Thomas, you remember, saw him, but you remember what our Lord said to him: 'Thomas, because thou hast seen me thou hast believed, blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed' (John 20:29). You may say to yourself, 'If I had the vision that Paul had on the road to Damascus, I might be able to say that I love him in exactly the same way, but I have never seen him.' But that is foolish - 'Whom having not seen, ye love' says Peter in 1 Peter 1:8. Read some of the great hymns, read the lives of the saints, they loved him. They have seen him with the eye of faith and we have their testimonies to that. The glory of the person of Jesus is the main cause of love. The tragedy is that we stop so much at the benefits of the Christian life. We are so anxious for blessings, that we forget the one who gives them. Paul did not; he saw that that blessed one had actually given his life and had gone to the cross for his sins - 'The Son of God, who loved me' - even me - 'and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). It is the glory and wonder of the cross. He gave all his life's blood for such a wretched sinner.

Next Paul had come to see and to know that apart from Christ there is no such thing as true life. In chapter 3 he uses that strong expression, 'and do count them but dung': refuse, worthless. Without Christ no one lives, it is only existence. Life, as we have seen, is meant to be full orb'd, the intellect satisfied, the feelings satisfied, the whole life enveloped, the whole man taken up by this complete, rounded life.

And, lastly, he felt and said it because of the new view of life which he had thus obtained. Paul had now been given to see that life in this world is really but a preparation for the great life that is coming. That does not mean to depreciate this world, nor does it mean scepticism or mysticism. If ever anyone lived an active life it was Paul: no, he did not die passively to the world in that sense, but rather to the sin of the world. For Paul had come to see that the world is in a great state of conflict between the kingdom of heaven and evil. He knew a day was coming when the King would return and rout the forces of evil and set up his kingdom. Now, said Paul, I am

destined for that; I am going to be in that. I may spend twenty years longer in this world, but think of the glory that awaits me, think of the life that is coming, the real life when the King shall reign and I shall be with him! And that, too, made him live for Christ.

So, then, I end with my question: is living to us, Christ? I wonder whether we can make that statement that was made by Count Zinzendorf, the Moravian leader who helped John Wesley both before and after his conversion. He had never had the vision that Paul had on the road to Damascus, but to him, too, Christ was in the centre. Can we make his motto our own? 'I have one passion, it is he and he alone.' 'To me living is Christ.' Oh that we all might have this passion! I believe we could transform our land in a day, I believe a great revival would come, if only we had this passion. He and he alone! Let us dwell upon him; let us meditate upon him; let us ask the Holy Spirit to reveal him to us. Let us pray for it; let us spend time with it; let us absorb it; let it take the central place; let us do all we can to get to know him better, for to know him is to love him.

I have one passion—it is he and he alone.