

The Changed Centre Through the Cross

by Jessie Penn-Lewis

The sermon emphasizes the transformative power of the Cross, leading to a new identity and life centered on Christ rather than self.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:14

Topics: "Transformation in Christ", "New Identity"

Description

Jessie Penn-Lewis emphasizes the transformative power of the Cross in the life of a believer, illustrating how the Apostle Paul viewed his identity as fundamentally changed through Christ's death. She explains that the love of Christ constrains believers to live not for themselves but for Him, marking a shift from a self-centered existence to one centered on Christ. This change of center is crucial for understanding the believer's new identity as a 'new creation' in Christ, which requires a deep, experiential understanding of the Cross. Penn-Lewis argues that true freedom and authority over sin come from recognizing and embracing this new identity, as the Holy Spirit works within to create a new personality aligned with Christ. The message calls for believers to continually apply the Cross in their lives, leading to ongoing transformation and growth.

Transcript

If One died for all, then all died [in Him]" 2 Corinthians 5: 15

As we read 2 Corinthians 5: 13- 18, we cannot fail to see how deeply, in this passage, the Cross is the very centre of the life of the Apostle. We are familiar with the fourteenth verse, which reads, "For the love of Christ constrains me, because I thus have judged, that if one died for all, then all died [in Him], and that He died for all, that the living might live no longer to themselves but to Him. . . ." These words taken alone unmistakably teach the identification of the believer with Christ in His death, and his emergence into a life where he lives wholly and entirely unto Christ, and not self. But if the words are read in connection with the context, preceding and succeeding verse 14, the veil is lifted in a remarkable way, showing that verse 14 is the very centre of a striking passage, revealing the circumstances and conditions which brought forth from Paul his reference to the Cross.

Let me try to picture the situation behind the words of the Apostle. His critics at Corinth were charging him with exalting himself, and being 'beside himself' with vanity, but he replies, "If I exalt myself it is for God's cause: if I humble myself, it is for your sakes". (Verse 13, Conybeare and Howson footnote.)

"For the love of Christ constrains me," and then he points to the Cross as the reason why he could say this about himself. He knew that it was not 'self exaltation' or vanity manifested in his zeal and intense abandonment to God, because of his identity with Christ in death. 'Self' was no longer the dominant centre of his being, 'self' was no longer the focal base from which he acted, either in 'exaltation' or 'humility'.

How expressive, in the light of this, are the words of the Apostle in verse 16. "We therefore"-here the pronoun, says Conybeare, is emphatic. "We therefore view no man carnally," i.e., as you have viewed me. You call me vain and mad in my zeal, but that is a carnal view-the view of the flesh. I know that I have died with Christ, and that I am no longer living unto myself. It is the love of Christ dwelling in me which constrains me"whosoever then, is IN CHRIST, is a new creation; his old being has passed away ... all comes out of God . . ." (Conybeare, and Gk. original). "You are calling me mad, and saying this, that and the other about me, but I know it is not 'I' which is dominating me, for I have seen the 'I' on the Cross. I have judged the true meaning of Christ's death. I see that if 'One' died for all, then 'all died', so that those who are thus 'IN Christ' become 'new creations'. Their centre is changed. They have a new centre-Christ-all is new and all comes out of (Greek ek) God, as the central spring of their lives. It is thus that the 'love of Christ' is constraining me, bursting out of me like a torrent from the central spring of His life, and not the mere zeal and enthusiasm which you carnally judge to be the power at work in me

How in line this is with God's way of revealing the meaning of the Cross to His children. The inner knowledge of the Cross can never be grasped by the intellect. The death of Christ at Calvary was something so awesome and terribly real, that only they who enter experimentally into that death can get even a glimpse into it. The message of the Cross can never be merely a 'doctrine', for it was something more than a 'doctrine' to Christ, and, as we see in the life of the Apostle of the Cross, to Paul. God's way of revealing truth is to work it into a man's experience-wrought out in the life, ere it can penetrate the intellect. We shall only get Paul's knowledge of the Cross as we get Paul's experience, i.e., we must be brought to the same experimental point from which he spoke, if we are to understand his message.

A Change of Centre

Now it is the change of centre, which Paul describes in this passage in Corinthians, which I want to dwell upon for a while. We have spoken of the Cross and death to sin, as shown in Romans 6; the Cross and death to the world as in Galatians 6; and sometimes of the 'grain of wheat' death-life depicted in John 12: 24, but we may get light about all these aspects of the Cross, and experience a measure of deliverance through the truth, and yet not know deep, deep down in our innermost being, this change of the 'I' centre which the Apostle speaks about in 2 Corinthians 5: 14. To put it in other words, there is something needing dealing with deeper than 'sin' or the 'world'. It is the selfhood-the 'ego'-the 'I'. Has the Cross penetrated there? "I," said Paul, "henceforth view no man carnally." When the 'I' centre is dealt with, the outlook is entirely changed. Even the 'view' of 'Christ' can be 'carnal' that is, from the viewpoint of the self-centre instead of the 'new creation' viewpoint which comes 'out of God'. It is this bed-rock basis of the inner life which we must get down to and examine in the light of the Cross. No other way can the Lord set free in us His rivers of living water, nor can we be brought into the place of authority over the powers of darkness, for the selfhood is poisoned at its source by the fallen nature of the first Adam.

Before passing on to further elucidate this from the Scriptures, let me read you a passage from the Appendix to "The Spirit of Christ", by Dr. Andrew Murray, in which he gives an extract from the writings of Dr. Dorner. He says: ...The character of Christ's substitution is not repressive of personality, but productive ... He is not content with the existence in Himself of the fulness of the spiritual life, into which His people

are absorbed by faith ... Christ's redeeming purpose is directed to the creation, by the Holy Spirit whom He sends, of new personalities in whom Christ gains a settled, established being.... As a new divine principle, the Holy Spirit creates, though not substantially, new faculties, a new volition, knowledge, feeling, a new selfconsciousness. In brief, He creates a new person, dissolving the old union-point of the faculties, and creating a pure union of the same. The new personality is formed in inner resemblance to the Second Adam, on the same family type, so to speak.... Through the Holy Spirit the believer has the consciousness of himself as a new man, and the power and living impulse of a new, holy life ... mere passivity and receptiveness are transformed into spontaneity, and productiveness. . . ."

Dr. Andrew Murray comments on this: "This thought that the Spirit of God, as the Spirit of the Divine personality, becomes the life principle of our personality, is one of extreme solemnity, and of infinite fruitfulness. The Spirit not only dwells in me as a localiy, or within me, alongside and around that inmost Ego in which I am conscious of myself, but, within that 'I' becomes the new and Divine life principle of the new personality. The same spirit that was and is in Christ, His inmost Self, becomes my inmost self. What new meaning it gives to the word 'He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit' with Him! And what force to the question, 'Know ye not that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?' The Holy Spirit is within me as a Personal power, with a will and a purpose of His own. As I yield up my personality to His I shall not lose it, but find it renewed and strengthened to its highest capacity

Here we have clearly set forth the change of 'centre' which Paul so acutely realized through the light he had had on the Cross.

Three times he affirms this basic 'new creation' as his experience. "I live; yet not I. (Galatians 2: 20). "I command; yet not I, but the Lord. .." (I Corinthians 7: 10) "I laboured ... ; yet not I. . ." (I Corinthians 15: 10).

In the Church at Corinth, in Paul's words in I Corinthians 1: 12, we have a glimpse of a contrast to this. "Every one of you saith 'I' . . . 'I' of Paul, 'I' of Apollos. . . ." But Paul did not say 'I' in the sense of 'I' being the originating and moving spring of his words and actions. 'I'---yes, it is 'I' still, but a new 'I'---a new personality. A new 'ego' as Dr.

Dorner says-not "Christ and I" , with 'I' at the centre, and Christ , so to speak, by His Spirit alongside of the 'I'. But a 'creation' by the Holy Spirit of a new 'I', because of the old 'I' nailed to the Cross with Christ (Galatians 2: 20).

This is something wholly beyond our power to grasp mentally. The 'new creation' work must be done by the Creator as much as in the first creation in Eden. Let us not be self-deceived, and imagine that "not I but Christ" is but a motto, a choice, a purpose. It is that, but far, far more. The Holy Spirit will do His part if we see our need and set ourselves for His deepest work of grace in us.

Here we need to go back to the most vital passage on the meaning of the Cross which is to be found in the New Testament. It is part of the great doctrinal Epistle to the Romans, wherein the Apostle lays down the foundation truths for the Christian Church, upon which the whole superstructure of the Christian life alone can be built.

Passing over the first necessary unfolding of the death of Christ as Propitiation for sin, God-ward (Romans 3:25), and then as Substitutionary for the sinner (Romans 5: 6-10), we come to the very bedrock focal point of the sinner's death in the death of his Substitute, in Romans 6. It is the spiritual fact which lay at the

base of Paul's words in Galatians 2: 20. "I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live, no longer I but Christ lives in me. . ." (Eng. Gk. N.T.). Familiar as we are with the words, and to some extent with the truths of Romans 6, let us take one word only in the chapter, strip it of the context, and through this word see how deep and real the basic central fact of 'I' crucified is meant to be. It is the word 'DEAD' in Romans 6: 2 (A.V.). The R.V. renders it 'died', so as to bring out the aorist tense which is so strongly embodied in it.

The Greek word is 'apothnesko'. The Greek Lexicon says of this word that it has a prefix "rendering the verb more vivid and intense, and representing the action of the simple verb as consummated and finished". It also gives as the meaning of the word, "to die out, to expire, to become quite dead".*

* These gleanings from the Greek are taken from Bullinger's critical Lexicon and concordance to the English and Greek New Testament.

The same word is used again in verse 7. "He that is dead (apothnesko) is freed from sin," and verse 8, "If we be dead with Christ". Now it is obvious that if Paul used such language of the believer's identification with Christ in His death, he meant something more than a 'likeness' or a figure.

Let us for a moment picture the Apostle dictating these words to the Romans. We know from other parts of his Epistles, how magnificently he would break out with bursts of truth flooding his spirit and mind, as with the very light of heaven. And it was always 'truth' revealed by the Spirit in response to need. Here we have Paul dictating his letter. Dealing with the question of 'grace' overflowing beyond the deepest depth of the outbreak of sin in the human race, an objection made by Judaising disputants against his doctrine, occurs to him, with the result that there bursts out of his spirit the most wonderful unveiling of the Cross. These Jews "argued that if the sin of man called forth so glorious an exhibition of the grace of God", then the "more men sinned, the more God was glorified".t But, says, the Apostle, the Cross deals not only with the sin, but with the sinner. Then he bursts out, in vivid and intense language:

"How shall we that are DEAD to sin live any longer therein? " That is, in Christ's death we have DIED TO SIN, as an act consummated and finished, and he that is thus 'dead' is freed from [slavery to] sin (Romans 6: 7)

Again let us note that this same word, apothnesko, DEAD, is used in 2 Corinthians 5:14, Galatians 2: 19 and 2 1, Colossians 2: 20, as well as in Colossians 3: 3, "For ye are DEAD. . . ." But let us be careful here. It does not speak at all in these passages of the experimental outworking of the Cross, but of a position-a central basic position of identification with the death of Christ-which has to be recognized and 'reckoned' upon by the believer ere the Holy Ghost can do His part of the work. The point I want to press is that all Paul's Epistles, with their marvellous unfoldings of the life of Christ for the Church, had at their base Paul's own personal experience of the 'I--the 'self '-crucified, and that we must get to the same basic position as the Apostle himself, "I have been crucified with Christ". "I live, yet not I . ." if we also are to enter into all that the 'heavenly life' means experimentally.

The Experimental Outworking

Now having laid the foundation of the need of a new centre, of a new creation, a new 'ego', so to speak, let us look at a few other passages showing that on the basis of having 'died out' to sin, as shown in Romans 6: 2, the Apostle uses other words to describe the experimental outworking of the Cross.

In Romans 8: 13, he writes, "If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body....." The margin of the A.V. says, "make to die the doings of the body". The Greek word used is thanatoo. The Greek Lexicon says of this, "to take away the vital principle, the aspect being the lifelessness of that from which the life has been taken away". Here is the work of the Holy Spirit with which the believer has to co-operate. On the faith basis of 'dead' (Romans 6: 2), the believer must now 'make to die' the 'deeds' of the body, i.e., yield to the Cross all the activity of the fallen nature, and as he does so, that activity will cease, for the 'Cross' deals with the fallen life which energizes the 'deeds' incited by it.

There is yet another word used by Paul in the same connection. This is nekroo, in Colossians 3: 5, in reference to the members of the body. The A.V. says 'mortify', the R.V. margin says 'make dead', the Lexicon note is "to make a dead body or a corpse, the aspect being toward the corpse and the deed by which it became such", i.e., the 'members' of the 'body' must be brought in all their actions into harmony with the central fact of 'death with Christ'. The 'members' are to be made 'dead', in that they are no longer to be energized by the fallen life of Adam, but brought under the power of the Cross. They are thereby made 'dead to sin' and alive unto God for His service (Romans 6: 13)

The Perpetual Death-life

And yet there is more. These words 'apothnesko' (to die out of sin), 'thanatoo' (to bring the deeds of the body under the power of that death), 'nekroo' (to deprive the members of the body of the activity of the old life), do not cover the whole ground. 2 Corinthians 4: 10-11 gives another word, showing that there will be no point in our life on earth where the need for the application of the Cross will cease. Verse 10 reads in the A.V., "always bearing out in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus". The word dying is nekrosis-a 'putting to death'. The Lexicon says it is "expressive of the action being incomplete and in progress". In verse 11 the word 'death' is 'thanatos'. The deep work of God at the centre is but the beginning of all that has to be wrought out in us by the Holy Spirit. How clearly the Greek words used bring out the position basis of having 'died out' in Christ's death, and the progressive 'putting to death' perpetually which must of necessity be done day by day. "In my body I bear about continually the dying of Jesus," writes the Apostle, but again the verbal exactitude of the Greek is shown in the use of the word 'thanatos' (death) in verse 11. The Lexicon says that this describes the cessation of life of any kind, i.e., The 'putting to death' of verse 10 to which the believer is always handed over by the Holy Spirit, is for the purpose of bringing about the cessation of the activity of the old life of nature-and this is not once for all, but continuously. So it just means that from centre to circumference, the identification of the believer with Christ in His death, is a necessity for the growth of the new life at the centre into full maturity.

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