

Christ Our Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes that Christ is our all through the transformative power of the Cross, leading to a life of joy and disinterestedness in service to God.

Scripture: Acts 16:6-13, Acts 16:23-26, Philippians 1:3-5, Philippians 1:19-21, Philippians 1:27, Philippians 1:29, Philippians 3:8, Philippians 4:4

Topics: "The Power of the Cross", "Christ as Our Life"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Letter to the Philippians reveals how the Cross makes Christ our all, urging believers to approach it with humility and a recognition of their own spiritual shortcomings. He highlights Paul's declaration, 'For me to live is Christ,' illustrating that true life is found in Christ alone, and that the Cross leads to a disinterestedness that allows the Holy Spirit to work freely in our lives. Sparks reflects on Paul's experiences in Philippi, where despite trials and contradictions, the sovereignty of God was evident, and joy was found in focusing on Christ rather than personal interests. The message encourages believers to seek a deeper relationship with Christ through the work of the Cross, leading to a life of joy and freedom from self. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a crucified life that embraces the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Transcript

Reading: Acts 16:6-13, 16-19, 23-26. Philippians 1:1-2.

We are beginning a meditation in the Letter to the Philippians with its message as to how the Cross makes Christ our all, for that is what this Letter really does bring before us. Not any of us can preach from this Letter as the standard of our attainment, but we must be very quiet and humble as we speak of it. Indeed, our approach must be that of its writer: "Brethren, I count not myself to have attained, neither am I already perfect."

When the Apostle wrote the Letter to the Romans, he set himself to set forth a great and tremendous theological argument. When he wrote his first Letter to the Corinthians, he set himself to answer a lot of questions that had arisen, and to give his judgment on some very serious matters. When he wrote the Letter to the Galatians, he gave himself up to issuing a tremendous challenge and to answering a challenge which had been issued. When he wrote his Letter to the Ephesians, he was pouring out a great revelation which had been growing and growing and growing until it had reached a great measure of fullness. But now, in writing this Letter to the Philippians, he is not doing any one of those things. He does

not say: 'Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ', nor: 'I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ.' No official designation is used and no great treatise is in his mind, but he simply takes the position of a man - with Timothy he says: "Bondsmen of Jesus Christ" - and is about to open his heart as a man to men, as a Christian to Christians, as a lover of Christ to other lovers of Christ, and to share what is in his heart on common ground and on a common level with them.

"Brethren" - he will say presently - "Brethren, I count not myself to have attained, neither am I already perfect, but this one thing I do...". You see, it is the appeal from his own spiritual life and aspiration. His position is just this: 'Brethren, this is what I have in view, what I am seeking after, and what I call upon you to join with me in seeking after!' That is the position of this Letter, and you and I must come to that position as we approach it, for here not one of us can give an address. We can only say: 'Brethren, this Letter is beyond us! All that is here is far beyond anything to which we have attained! We cannot preach at one another but here is the Lord's thought, and let us talk to one another about it with a view to encouraging one another if it may be that we, by any means, may also attain.' So that is our starting-point. May it be that the Lord leads us on from that to some increased measure of Himself!

We have said that the message which comes out of the Letter bears upon Christ as our all through the work of His Cross, and that arises in several particular connections. Each chapter of the four has a particular connection. We shall now just look at the first, which arises in chapter 1, verse 21:

For to me to Live is Christ, and to Die is Gain

'For me to live is Christ.' Then that means that Christ is our very life, the very motive of our life, of our being. Asked what life means, the Apostle would say: 'Just Christ!' 'What does life mean to you, Paul?' 'Christ!' 'What is your outlook, Paul?' 'Christ!' 'What are you working for, Paul?' 'Christ!' 'What is your hope?' 'It is Christ!' 'Have you nothing else, nothing else at all in this world for all your days?' 'No, nothing else. Christ, just Christ; that is all! For me to live, for me to live is Christ!'

I think we have already established what we said a minute or two ago: this Letter is beyond us! I think that if we were put to the test on that in a number of different connections, interests, associations and objects on this earth, we should be weighed in the balances and found wanting. Well, we will not press it. It would be too painful and we should all be ashamed. But, again, it is an object and an aspiration that it should be like that.

Before we go further, let us just look over this chapter and see what place Christ has here:

Verse 1: "Bondsmen of Christ Jesus."

2: "Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

6: "Until the day of Jesus Christ."

8: "The tender mercies of Christ Jesus."

11: "The fruits of righteousness... through Christ Jesus."

13: "My bonds... in Christ."

15: "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife."

18: "What then? only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice."

19: "The supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ."

20: "As always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life, or by death."

21: "To me to live is Christ."

23: "...to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better."

26: "Your glorying may abound in Christ Jesus."

27: "Worthy of the gospel of Christ."

29: "To you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer in his behalf."

It is Christ everywhere, Christ in every direction, in every connection; it is all Christ.

Christ Our Life by Way of the Cross

Now then, we have to see how the Cross had brought Paul to the place where Christ was his very life, and how it had wrought in him to bring him to that place. We have read from the account of how this church at Philippi came into being, and we picked up the story at the point where Paul and his companions were moving prayerfully, and in the Spirit, forward in their great ministry. They reached one point and essayed to move on in a certain direction, but they were not suffered of the Holy Spirit to go and preach in that direction, and, finding that way closed, they sought to move in another direction, and again the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not; and so they stayed still. For the night at least they stayed where they were and prayed, I suppose, and during that night a vision came to Paul. You notice that HE saw the vision and THEY came to the conclusion. The man of Macedonia stood and appealed, saying: 'Come over into Macedonia and help us!', and they concluded that the Lord had called them to preach the Gospel there. So they went by a straight course into Macedonia, into Europe for the first time, and came to Philippi. That all seems fairly straightforward. They went down on the Sabbath Day by the riverside, supposing that they would find a place for prayer. I expect that they were looking in all directions for the man of Macedonia. You know what they found - a woman, not of Macedonia at all, but from Asia, where they had been forbidden to go and preach the Word! Contradiction number one! And then a girl possessed of an evil spirit bothered, worried, annoyed and vexed them; not much hope of things in that direction! Contradiction number two! And then the immediate issue of Paul's act - they were thrown into the inner prison and their feet made fast in the stocks! Contradiction number three! Where is this man of Macedonia? Where is this open door for preaching the Gospel?

Now I venture to say that you and I might just have sat down and said: 'This is a terrible case of mistaken guidance. It is all a mistake! I was quite sure that the Lord gave me that vision, that the Lord was in that matter of our coming this way, but everything now argues to the contrary! Now, seeking to do what I believed to be the Lord's will, this is where I get landed. I was trying to follow the Spirit's leading, and checking up as I went, and this is what obedience to the Lord results in!' Something like that would go on inside, at any rate, for the devil would see to it. The situation, the appearances, the apparent contradictions, on the one hand, and then bleeding sores and a dark dungeon. These are things which are

calculated to raise very serious questions about your Divine guidance and being in the will of God. At any rate, they provide good ground for the enemy to encamp upon. Well, I have no doubt that it was a very real and severe test of faith for Paul and Silas as to their guidance.

How did they survive? How did they get on top of this situation? For undoubtedly they were on top of it. At midnight they prayed and sang hymns. Again, I have to pause and say that this Letter is beyond us, and this whole matter finds us wanting. I think the answer, at least, a part of it, to the question of their triumph in such a situation is this: that the Cross had done a work deep enough to rule out all personal interests, and personal interests were so thoroughly ruled out that the Holy Spirit Himself had a clear way to bring up their spirits in triumph in spite of darkness in circumstances and darkness in spiritual appearances. The Holy Spirit was able to do this. You notice what Paul says in this first chapter - and it does seem to me that there is much in this Philippian Letter which is an echo of the Philippian experiences years before - "For I know that this shall turn out to my salvation, through your supplication and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." 'The supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.' Do you not think that that explains it?

We do not want to be too analytical or introspective, but it will not do us any harm to take account of our own disposition. If we are quite honest with our own hearts, is it not true that a very large measure of our darkness under trial, our failure, our breakdown, our going to pieces, our loss of position spiritually, is because we are disappointed, and our disappointment lies very largely in the direction of something upon which our hearts were set, something of personal interest even in the Lord's work; OUR ministry, the WORK - meaning, of course, the Lord's work and things for the Lord. We would not call it OUR ambition - perhaps we have never used the word 'ambition' - but may there not be an element of that lying behind our vision, something, even though it were for the Lord, which we had hoped would be blessed and prospered, and the Lord would give good success? The whole thing is brought, like David's enterprise with the ark on the new cart, to a sudden hold-up and everything seems to go to pieces, and WE go to pieces; then, when the truth is really known, we discover that there were really personal interests in it.

It does seem to me that in Paul's case the great factor in his triumph continually - for he was a triumphant man - in the midst of terrible adversities and trials and difficulties and sufferings all the way through the years was his utter disinterestedness; that with him there was no personal interest at all. It was Christ. The Cross had smitten everything personal, and this Letter to the Philippians is full of that. Take this fragment, for instance: "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife, and some also of good will: the one do it of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel; but the other proclaim Christ of faction, not sincerely, thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds" (verses 15-17).

How mean, how contemptible, how wicked to preach Christ with a motive like that! To preach Christ in such a way as to afflict one of Christ's servants! What does Paul say? 'Contemptible wretches! The Lord bring His judgments to bear upon them!?' Not at all! 'Oh, what does it matter how they preach Christ? Christ is preached, and that is all that matters. Therein I rejoice and will rejoice!' I tell you that it wants a crucified man to say that! A man is in prison in bonds; other men are trying to hit him when he is down and are using the very Gospel or the preaching of the Gospel - their manner of preaching the Gospel - to that end. Then this man says: 'That is all right. I will simply stand all that and thank the Lord that, however they preach, so long as Christ is preached, that is all that matters!' I say that it is a crucified man who can say that, a man who has no personal feelings or interests.

You know what he says a little later in the Letter about all the things that were gain to him. 'I was this, and I was that, and I was the other. I had this and I had that, and I was in a position. Yes, but these things which

were gain to me I counted loss for Christ' - "Yea, verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and to count them as refuse, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him" (chapter 3:4-8). You see, the Cross has dealt with name, reputation, position, advantages and everything that was personal. This man has come to the tremendous vantage ground of perfect disinterestedness and selflessness, and it is the working out of the principle that the Holy Spirit follows the way of the Cross.

The Spirit Follows the Way of the Cross

That is true right through the Word. The Cross leads the way of the Spirit: the Spirit follows the way of the Cross. We sing:

"Enlarge our soul's capacity,

Cut deeper channels, Lord.

Room for the floods of blessing new,

According to Thy Word."

'Cut deeper channels' - the Cross cutting the way for the supply of the Spirit. Here is the message, if we said no more. Paul was a man who was crucified to self. The Cross had wrought that in him, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus did the rest. Oh, I cannot preach at you! I can only say to you: 'Brethren, will not the Holy Spirit spontaneously take the course which the Cross has opened up? Will not the Spirit of Jesus come in and lift us up, even in our sufferings and our sorrows, when we have got rid of that horrible, hateful, obstructive self-interest, self-pity, self-consideration, self-realization and self-strength?' I am sure our hearts must be smitten by this word if it is true. If you and I - and this is the sum of the whole Letter - can really come, by the grace of God, to the place where the Cross has wrought in us so that we are delivered from all self-interest, on its weak side and on its strong side, the Spirit of Jesus Christ will make a difference in our case in the time of adversity which will turn the midnight into midday, darkness into light, and make us sing in a dungeon. At least it is worth thinking about! In Paul's case the Cross had resolved everything into a matter of Christ.

Now, perhaps some of you have gone beyond me, and even yet there lurks somewhere in your mind this question: 'Yes, but those who are most utter for the Lord, most out-and-out and most thorough-going for the Lord, are very often the ones who have the greatest reason to wonder whether the Lord is for them.' And yet when that question arises - and I must press this again - there is a tremendous deliverance from the sting of that sort of thing when you know, and the Lord knows, that you have no other concern but for His glory. I think the sting of discouragement, disappointment, despair and doubt is very often found just in the tail of some self-interest which means disappointment, personal disappointment as well as disappointment for the Lord. Well, what I see here in Paul's case is that, with the destruction of these self-elements, he came to a position which was a very strong one. This position - "For me to live is Christ" - in his case was a very strong position in the hour of deepest difficulty and trial. "I KNOW that this shall turn to my salvation." "Now I would have you know that the things which have happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel." That is a strong position!

A Strong Position

What is the strength of it? It is this: that the sovereignty of God is behind it. If you and I can come to the place where this is true in our case - "For me to live is Christ" - where the Lord Himself knows that it is true and not just something said by us, then I believe it is a position which has the sovereignty of God behind it. See them at Philippi again! They were there for the Lord, and for the Lord only, without any kind of interest at all apart from His interests. Well, the situation which arose was a very difficult and perplexing one, apparently full of contradictions, but look at the sovereignty of God behind it!

How strategic it was, to begin with, in that it was an open door into Europe! And what an assembly came into being!

"I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you, always in every supplication of mine on behalf of you all making my supplication with joy, for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel from the first day until now" (1:3-5).

What an assembly! And what a sovereign act to make the first members of that assembly the very gaoler and his family! Where Lydia came in I do not know. She was evidently a commercial traveller, and you know that that meant great possibilities for the Gospel, for she linked up Asia and Europe. It is all very strategic and wonderful, and God is behind this whole thing - and yet what a complication! If you sit down with the thing at the outset and take the situation which immediately arises, you say: 'Well, this is a mess! This is a mistake. You have made a blunder this time!' And you give it all up and lose your confidence in God. Well, Satan knew better than that: and these men who had not any personal interests did not go down under despair. They proved the sovereignty of God. And Paul in another prison years afterwards in Rome wrote this Letter and just touched on the same thing - that the sovereignty of God was behind a crucified life: "I would have you know that the things which have happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel." "I know that this shall turn to my salvation." The sovereignty of God! It is a strong position, but we cannot be sure of sovereignty unless we are well crucified. If there is any sovereignty of 'I' or self, the sovereignty of God is set aside.

An Emancipated Position

And then it was a very emancipated position. How unfettered Paul was by human judgments! It did not matter a scrap to him what people thought or said or did. He was a free man all the time, whether he was in prison or out. Why? Simply for this. If you and I KNOW that we are not out for something here, that our hearts are really for the Lord and the Lord only, it is a wonderfully emancipated position to be in. What does it matter? Let these men preach in the manner in which they mean to bring harm upon us, preach against us, and even use the Gospel as an instrument against us! What does it matter? We are emancipated; we are on top of that! All are emancipated who are delivered from self. If we know that there is no question about our utterness for the Lord, we are not worried very much about things said and things done.

A Joyous Position

And I see, too, what a joyous position it was, and I say: 'I see it.' I am not telling you that I have got it, but I see it. Someone has said that the Letter to the Philippians can be summed up in a very brief sentence. It is this: "I rejoice! You rejoice!" And that is the Letter - "I rejoice and you rejoice!" It is full of joy right through - joy in the Lord. And what is the secret of joy? If you ask what the secret of misery is I can tell you very quickly: to be occupied with yourself. The secret of joy is to be occupied with the Lord.

May the Lord lead us into Paul's secret: the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ by the Cross!

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