

# Life, the Criterion

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Bible makes life its horizon, and all that is within its covers is related to this issue in some way, with the ultimate reality being Christ as the Life.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 2:9, John 10:10, John 14:6, Romans 6:23, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:1-5, Colossians 3:4, 1 John 5:11-12, Revelation 2:7, Revelation 22:2

**Topics:** "Eternal Life", "Spiritual vs. Natural Life"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that life is the central theme of the Bible, beginning with the Tree of Life in Genesis and culminating in the New Testament's revelation of eternal life through Jesus Christ. He contrasts two kinds of life: the natural life common to all creatures and the superior, eternal life that is only found in Christ. Sparks argues that the natural world symbolizes deeper spiritual truths, and that the choice between life and death was established early in human history through the symbolic trees in the Garden of Eden. Ultimately, he asserts that possessing eternal life through Christ is essential for fulfilling God's divine intention for humanity.

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## Transcript

"The tree of life also in the midst of the garden" (Gen. 2:9).

"The tree of life, which is in the garden of God" (Rev. 2:7, margin).

"The tree of life" (Rev. 22:2,14).

Thus the Bible, first and last, makes life its horizon. It would not be wrong to say that all that is within the covers of the Bible is related - in some way - to this particular issue. It certainly was the governing matter in the creation record, and all human history is shown there to turn upon it: we shall see that life is the predominant issue in redemption. This being the case, it must be the paramount question in creation and human history.

But we have to begin our consideration of this vast matter by noting the Bible comparison and contrast between

Two Kinds of Life

In the main the Bible uses the word 'life' in two different ways and kinds. It uses the word to define the common life of all animate creatures. The Greek word for this kind of life is that from which we derive the word 'biology', which is simply 'the science of life'.

Genesis (the Book of Beginnings) tells us that God made living things:

Trees; flowers; vegetables.

Creatures; beasts, birds, fishes.

Man; a living soul having "the breath of life".

Life, of this natural kind, was the basis of animation, growth, propagation, etc.

But, into the midst of this life in all its forms, intimation, representation, and presentation, another kind of life is represented. It was possible to have animal and human life without having this other - and altogether different and superior - life. Indeed, to fail to possess this 'altogether other' life was (and is) to fail of the true Divine intention and destiny. To possess it would lift mankind on to a higher level altogether, and mean immortality to the creation. We leave that point there for the moment while we emphasise the fact that life is the criterion of everything.

Life, The Criterion

Up to a little over one hundred years ago it was generally believed by scientists that the universe - living creatures included - was explained on mechanical lines. It was all a great machine, wound up, moving by certain laws, and after millions of years, would run down and collapse or disintegrate. Mechanization was the inclusive law of all motion, processes, progress and relativity. That interpretation has now been completely and positively discarded and abandoned. Its place has been taken by biology, which, in its enthronement, is called 'The Queen of Sciences'. This is thought to be progress, but it is really just a return to Genesis and the Bible. Biology means that life is the basis and explanation of the whole animate creation or universe. Moreover, there is a wide acceptance that, far from chance, hap, accident, there is a Mind behind the universe, and that things are organic rather than mechanic.

This is all good, and a wonderful step 'back-forward', but there is another very big step required; for, good and significant as this biological fact may be, it does not solve the problem of man's destiny. So far, we are established on a basic fact, that life is the criterion, the law and principle of all being, development and reproduction.

But when we have said that, with all its vast ramifications, we need the other half of the Bible to carry us further. So, another quite different and distinct word is introduced with the New Testament. Sometimes it stands alone, but often something definitive is given to it: it is termed 'Eternal Life'. Seeing that the word 'eternal' is applied to God and to what is characteristic of Him, it must mean more than an age, a measure of time even beyond the human span; it must go outside of time altogether. But the word as used and associated is not only an extension, it is a kind, a quality, a nature, altogether different from and superior to life as we know it naturally. This life, the Bible teaches, is something that no man possesses naturally. If this is the only true life, then, by nature all men are dead while they live (biologically), as the Bible teaches.

Well, this just states the simple basic truth and position.

One more thing before we open out to the wider field. If, as we believe, there is a Mind behind creation, and particularly the animate creation, then we are ready to see a further great truth taught by the Bible.

This truth is that the natural, the material and organic creation is intended to embody and represent a vast counterpart of intangible thought and principles. In a word, the created universe is a vast symbolism. Just as a potter expresses his thoughts in the vessels he makes, so that those vessels are ideas in representation, so God has wrapped up His thoughts in His creation. If we could read what is within the product of God's hands and interpret with the mind of God, we should know what God is like and what He means.

This being true, we must carry the truth into the realm of life, and see that natural life - as it came from God - is the part of which spiritual or Divine life is the counterpart. What is true of human life is a representation of something much higher - Divine life. That is what we hope to see as we proceed with these meditations. Life in the natural is itself a marvellous and mysterious thing. It certainly is a mystery. No one has ever yet explained what life is. Only by its presence and expression do we know of its existence, but we can never explain or define it. That is, perhaps, the first parable of life. Even natural life is capable of endurance and manifold expression beyond all calculation. Let us consider

#### The Variety of Life.

It only needs to be suggested that any attempt to count the number and variety of life in its different realms to show how hopeless such an undertaking would be. In some realms this has been done. For instance, it is computed that there are at least 25,000 named backbone animals; ten times as many backboneless animals, and as many plants. There are 100,000 flowering plants. When we take vermin and insects - rats and rabbits, etc. - the rate of multiplication, and the way in which survival overtakes mortality, figures defeat calculation. Every single one of these has life after its kind.

When we turn to the power, energy, and endurance of life, we open the door to the necessity of volumes to be written. As a hint, just consider that we find animals among the snow at a height of 10,000 feet; and they are found on the floor of the sea six miles deep where Mount Everest would be much more than engulfed. It is hard to say what great difficulties are encountered and overcome by living creatures - insects in hot springs where you could not keep your hand; living things under fifteen feet of ice.

The story is positively fascinating and amazing. Life, filling every niche, finding homes in extraordinary places, mastering difficulties, adjusting to out-of-the-way exigencies; persistent and intrusive; spreading everywhere, insinuating itself, adapting itself, resisting, defying, surviving everything! A tiny seed, dropped or carried by the wind into a crevice of a great rock will, as it grows, split that rock open until a large tree declares the power of life. The Grand Canyon of Arizona has many an instance of this. That canyon itself is now one mighty testimony in its foliage and beauty to the way in which life can take hold of the devastation and desolation caused by volcanic eruption, and turn its carnage into an attraction to the whole world. This is but a faint, distant approach to the marvels of life. If what we said earlier is true, that the natural is a symbol of the spiritual, what immense and outstanding things must be true of the higher and greater, the life which is supernatural! What a story the past two thousand years tell of the miracles, wonders, triumphs, survivals, endurances, and expansions of the life of God, given in and by His Son, Jesus Christ, to His Church, and to individuals who have received Him as 'the Life, the Eternal Life'! What a challenge this is to the Church's testimony! What a call to clear the way of what is spiritually and morally inimical to that Life in the Church and the Christian!

This is but introductory. We have to break this great matter into its relevant parts; but, with this little, surely we can begin to see that God has horizoned everything by life; in the natural, but immensely more so in the spiritual. The criterion of all is livingness!

In the organic creation everything depends upon whether life is present or not. If a thing or a person is without life, the door is closed; hope ends; there is no prospect (unless a miracle intervenes). We just say: 'Well, that is that, and there is no more.' The only remaining thing is burial. The departure of life means the reign and triumph of corruption. If there is life, and it can be stimulated and ministered to effectively, as in the human body or the garden, then corruption is held at bay and set back.

Which of these two issues was to prevail - the entrance and reign of corruption, mortality, and hopelessness, or the defeat of that intrusion with the entrance of an incorruptible, deathless and age-abiding life - is said by the Bible to have been decided at an early point in human existence. It was decided in a probation, the probation of choice, and choice based upon warning, caution and counsel. Clear, precise, concise and strong was the situation presented. The alternatives were God's will and way, or man's will and way as contrary to God's. It was the alternative of man's selfhood as against God's supreme right to be trusted and obeyed. It was the question of God's exclusive and unique authority, and His beneficent disposition toward man, or the mind and will of another making man's independent and self-centred judgment the directive motive. On these two issues the question of two things hung; one, the obtaining of an incorruptible and deathless life, or, the missing of that and the blight of corruption falling upon the very natural life of man and creation. This alternative was set forth symbolically in two trees with their respective fruits - 'The Tree of Life' and 'The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil'.

If you do not want to regard these as two literal trees, it will not affect the issue, for, after all, it is principles which govern, and what arises is just the laws of life and death. The Bible records the choice which was made; the side upon which man came down; the use which he made of his great trust - choice, free will; but choice with an exhortation and warning; not in ignorance!

History is the record of that choice; it is also the history of man's endorsement of, and adherence to that choice as against a way which God made forthwith out of the entanglement. I have said that it was principles that governed. That is quite true, but I had better hurry up and introduce what is going to be the inclusive, ultimate and pre-eminent reality.

The Old Testament is mainly built upon a great and detailed system of types, symbols and parables. This method runs on into the New Testament so far as the four Gospels and the Apocalypse are concerned, but with one over-ruling difference. The New Testament expounds and explains the Old, and, in this supreme matter of life, it overwhelms us with the revelation that that Tree of Life is but a type and symbol of a Person, namely, God's Son, Jesus Christ. On this point - focal point - a precise and inclusive statement is made by the Apostle John in his first Letter: And the witness [or testimony] is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life" (1 John 5:11,12). That is categorical. The whole letter must be read in the light of that statement. It makes everything Christo-centric. It puts human destiny upon His being the centre. It sums up the whole issue of life - or death - in Him!

Life in Christ, and Christ as the Life, is the horizon of all things.

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