

# The Grace of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

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*The sermon argues that the personal experience of Christ is a valid means of verifying the reality of Christ, and that this experience is unique to Christianity due to its personal and relational nature.*

**Scripture:** John 9:25, Romans 8:6, Romans 15:13, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 1:21, 1 Peter 1:8

**Topics:** "Christian Experience", "Transformative Grace"

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## Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas emphasizes the importance of Christian experience, highlighting how it has gained recognition in the scientific world and serves as a valid argument for the truth of Christianity. He delves into the transformative power of Christ in the lives of believers, showcasing the significant changes, new directions, and deep satisfaction that come from a personal relationship with Jesus. Through the example of the Apostle Paul and other historical figures like Augustine, Luther, and Wesley, he demonstrates how encounters with Christ lead to radical transformations and unwavering devotion.

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## Transcript

It is only within comparatively recent years that attention has been given by scientific men to the fact and reality of Christian experience. Formerly it was either disregarded altogether or else set aside as too variable and unreliable to be worthy of serious notice. But this is no longer possible. The domain of science is being enlarged almost daily, and place is now being found for those experiences in human hearts and lives which accrue from the reception of Christ's teaching and the acknowledgment of His authority.

They can be studied, and should be studied, for they are available for scientific investigation. There is such a thing as Christian experience, the precise and unique experience of those who are true followers of Christ, and this constitutes an argument of no mean weight and importance for the position for which we are now arguing. We have already considered the evidence of the Church as a whole regarded as an objective fact of history and present-day life. We must now seek to analyze what this means from the standpoint of the individual Christian who is a member of the Church - what it is that makes and keeps him a member of that society whose one bond of union is personal relationship to Christ.

What constitutes this relationship - wherein lies its power over human lives? It will be seen that this argument from experience is capable of being verified, quite apart from any question of the credibility of the Gospels or any proper appreciation of the various historical, philosophical, and critical arguments for Christ and Christianity. Not that we have any desire or intention to separate the Christ of History from the

Christ of Experience, for the two are ultimately and inextricably united.

But the verification of the Christ of Experience is possible apart from any elaborate discussion or intellectual conviction of the historical and theological grounds of belief in Christ. In its proper place and for its precise purpose this argument from experience is eminently worthy of consideration. We can imagine someone approaching an old Christian of no great education or intellectual power, and putting before him the various arguments for Christianity based upon the Gospels, or the witness of the Church, or the results of Christianity in the world, and we can also imagine that old believer expressing his utter inability to understand and appreciate these arguments, and yet able to bear his own personal testimony to what Jesus Christ is to him as a living experience today.

Now the question arises whether this argument from personal experience is valid. What is the claim of Christian experience? What does Christianity claim today for the individual? A true follower of Jesus Christ will say that Christ has made an entire change in his life. He is conscious of a great difference between his past and his present. Old things have gone, new things have come. He is conscious of a burden removed, of a vision clarified; he knows something of what is meant by the Bible phrase, "the joy of salvation".

Those who have not experienced this change may deny its reality, but not with any pretense to reason and fairness. We must take the testimony of reasonable, upright, and competent men when they tell us that Christ has made a difference to them. Further, the true believer of Jesus Christ tells us that Christ has given a new direction to his life. Not only is the past different, the present also is changed. He is conscious of a new life, new powers, new principles, new aspirations, new hopes.

He can say with literal truth, "Once I was blind; now I see," and "Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." Yet again, the true follower of Jesus Christ tells us that Christ has provided a perfect satisfaction for his life. His mind is now at rest in the truth of Christ, his heart in the love of Christ, his conscience in the law of Christ, and his will in the grace of Christ. He is ready to be, to do, to suffer anything by reason of what Christ is to his soul.

This consciousness of peace as he looks back over the past, of power as he considers the needs of the present, of hope as he surveys the possibilities of the future, are all very real, precious, and potent in his experience, and constitute the very life of his life. This is the argument from Christian experience which is found in the New Testament, in all the centuries of Church history, and in the Christian life of today. Christ is real, Christ is precious, Christ is powerful, Christ is all.

In our books of devotion Christ is the supreme object, in our hymns of praise and adoration Christ is the one theme, in the work of Christian missions Christ is the one subject underlying all differences of race, place, circumstance, temperament, and community. There is an irreducible minimum of experience, true of all genuine followers of Jesus Christ, and he who possesses it is perfectly conscious that Christ is a living reality. In proof of this argument from Christian experience it would be possible to bring forward the evidence of representative men of all ages and Churches, such as Augustine, Bernard, Luther, Leighton, Bunyan, Wesley and Wilberforce, but we will confine ourselves to one witness, a man who was formerly the ruthless persecutor of the Church of Christ, and who became one of the leading Christians of his age.

We mean, of course, the Apostle Paul. He was never tired of bringing forward his own life as a testimony to the reality of Jesus Christ, and to the Gospel that he preached and lived. The witness of St. Paul is one of the chief arguments from the standpoint of Christian experience. It will help us to appreciate this evidence the more if we recall something of what Saul the persecutor was as a man. He was a man of

powerful intellect. He was a thinker, a man whose intellectual life showed unmistakable signs of his training at home, in Jerusalem, and as a member of the chief Council of the Jews.

He was also a man of strong feeling. Intellect always influences feeling, and if the intellect is feeble the feelings will be feeble also. Saul of Tarsus could love in a way worthy of the name of love, and he could also hate so as to make people fear his hatred. His feelings gave force to his purpose, emphasis to his words, decision to his action. Still more, he was a man of intense conscientiousness. His training as a Jew had developed his scrupulosity and conscientiousness to a very high degree.

Above all, he was a man of determined will. When intellect, feeling and conscience combine to influence the will the real man is clearly seen. Saul had learned to hate Christ and Christianity. We are told that he persecuted them in Jerusalem, and went on his errand of hatred to the far-off city of Damascus. He was "exceedingly mad" against them, he "compelled them to blaspheme," he "breathed out threatenings and slaughters" against the Christians, he "made havoc of the Church," "dragging men and women to prison."

This is the man of high capacity, expert knowledge, high culture, lofty intellect, intense virility, whom we wish to examine on behalf of Christian experience. It is a simple matter of fact that the persecutor became convicted of his errors and that this conviction led to an entire change of life and purpose. He soon began to love what he had formerly hated, and to preach the very Gospel that he had set out to destroy. How are we to account for this simple yet stupendous change?

One of the keenest intellects of modern times, F. C. Baur of Tubingen, confessed that the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was an insoluble problem to him. "No psychological or dialectical analysis sufficiently explains the mystery of the act by which God revealed His Son to Saul." This admission of Baur remains unshaken today, and the problem of Saul's conversion still awaits solution by any other method than the one that he puts forth himself. His conversion, however, was only the beginning of a new life.

It is one thing to change, it is another to continue changed; and yet for twenty-five years his life was devoted to entirely opposite ends to those which had formerly been his experience. We have only his own testimony to what those years meant (2 Cor. 11) as he preached, labored and suffered, to see the reality and the permanence of the change. It lasted. He had everything to lose, and, humanly speaking, nothing to gain by accepting Jesus Christ as his Master. Yet amidst all the anxieties toils, sufferings, and strain of those twenty-five years he reveals a perfect satisfaction with what had taken place on the way to Damascus and with the living Christ whose servant he rejoiced to be.

In spite of his intensely strong individuality, he was only an echo of Jesus Christ. From the moment of his conversion his life was summed up in his own motto, "To me to live is Christ." Now if the Apostle's life of testimony to Christ is true, his conversion must have involved a real change, a deliberate break with his past. And if his conversion is real, then Christ rose from the dead, and Christ is God. The Apostle attributes everything to Christ. "Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?"

He has the three marks of the true witness - intelligence, candor and disinterestedness. And we are therefore warranted in accepting his personal assurance that the revelation of Jesus Christ produced in him that system of thought and life which he calls his Gospel, and which is with us today in the Christianity of the Epistles, and also in that Christianity as reproduced in human life. We can only account for his influence by means of his apostleship and conversion. These in turn can only be explained by his own personal experience of Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord.

Now this testimony of one man could be reproduced in its essential features from the history of Christian experience through the centuries. Christian biography bears witness to the simple fact that in whatever way the experience called conversion comes, it brings with it a definite break with the past, it gives an entirely new aim to life, and it provides a perfect satisfaction in the deep recesses of the soul. Wendell Phillips once made this reply in a coterie at Boston when someone told him that Jesus was amiable, but not strong.

"Not strong?" replied he, "test the strength of Jesus, by the strength of the men whom He has mastered." From the earliest records in the earliest books of the New Testament down to the latest records of the newest mission to the heathen the facts of Christian experience are to all intents and purposes essentially the same. Christ is living, Christ is real, Christ is powerful, Christ is precious - this is the one theme. Every conversion involves a distinct change, a definite consciousness of Christ, and a deep devotion to Him.

The old world knew nothing of conversion: instead of an Ecce Homo they had only some choice of Hercules. [Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, book ii, ch. 10.] Nor is it to be found in the other great religious systems of today. The almost entire absence of the data of religious experience outside Christianity is a striking and significant fact. Professor William James acknowledges this in his study of religious experience. The absence of strictly personal confessions is the chief difficulty to the purely literary student who would like to become acquainted with the inwardness of religions other than the Christian. [James, Varieties of Religions Experience, p. 402.]

How is it that these things are so? What is that type of saintliness which is found in the Christian Church and is not found elsewhere? It is best described as Christlikeness, and the term at once suggests the reason why it is not found outside Christianity. It is impossible to account for these experiences apart from personality. As they are realized in the personality of the Christian, so they proceed from the personality of Christ. No mere influence or impersonal force can explain the spiritual experiences of the Christian man.

When we analyze them this is clearly seen. If we think of the forgiveness which leads to the break with the past, it is obvious that pardon comes from, and is received by, a person. If we think of the new aim and object which marks the Christian life, it is equally clear that nothing short of personal relations to a Person whose Will is henceforward the law of life can explain the force of this new trend in experience. And if we think of the inner satisfaction which is the deepest experience of the Christian, it seems impossible to believe that such satisfaction, covering as it does intellect, heart, conscience, and the whole inner moral being, can be derived from any source less than personal.

Religious thought is carried on in terms of personality, this being in the world of religion the one fundamental fact. [James, Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 491.] And since personality is the source of religion, it is obvious that if that personality is not Christ's it is no one else's. We are therefore once again brought face to face with the fact of Christ in relation to Christian experience. It calls for close scrutiny and personal verification, and the more it is tested in this way, the more it will be found to crown the other arguments from history and reason.

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