

LIVING IN GOD'S POWER

I'll let you into a secret. I want to live an extraordinary life. I really do. The best that the world offers doesn't look that good to me. I dream of something more. I dream of living a life that counts for something. I dream of being the sort of person who loves people rather than the sort of person who wants people to like them. I dream of not getting consumed by the self-centred, materialistic, distracted, spirit-sapping dullness I see all around me.

Sometimes I have days where the world seems to be the dullest, most futile, lonely, pointless waste of time imaginable. I feel depression gnawing at the edge of my soul. I wonder if I've got it all wrong, if it's all hopeless. I get tempted to give up and sink into that anesthetized despair that passes for culture. I wonder if the feeling will go away or whether it will be the same tomorrow. The dark corners of my imagination seem somehow attractive. I'm reminded that the world around me is dying.

Other days, the wonder, the affection and the presence of God is so real and immediate I feel I could burst with joy. Life is full of fantastic possibilities. Creation drips with beauty and mystery. People seem wonderful, the burden of my brokenness and those around me is lifted. My heart is flooded with gratitude to God and telling him so only seems to fuel the passion and life in my heart. I'm reminded that the Father is renewing all creation and a day is coming when they will be no more mourning or crying or pain.

Question. Which of these two perspectives is the real one? And the answer, of course, is both. Creation is being polarised by the invasion of God into our space and time in the person of Jesus. Some are moving towards him and proving true his prophecy that streams of living water would flow from those who believed. Others choose disbelief and walk away into utter darkness, nursing their brokenness with their pride.

What's the difference between these two groups? Simply the gospel of Jesus Christ. And Paul says something quite amazing about God in 2 Corinthians 5: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

How wild is that. My heavenly father is saving the world, and he wants to do it through me. Which brings me back to my starting point. I want to live an extraordinary life.

But there's a problem. I'm not an extraordinary person. In fact, I'm a very normal person. I'm over cautious. I don't like feeling on the edge. I can be incredibly selfish and in the darker corners of my mind and heart, I'm capable of fanaticising very depraved things which I wouldn't enjoy telling you about.

So what are my prospects? Is there any hope of rising above the monotony of the ordinary? Can I become a man of single-hearted devotion to God? Can I know Christ in such a way that he's more real to me than my physical senses? Can I see thousands influenced for God through my life? Can this nation, this continent, be turned back to God? Can we get the gospel to everyone everywhere? Can things change? I want to share a verse that offers hope:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Galatians 2v20

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If there's hope for me to grasp this extraordinary life, then this verse points to the heart of it. I'm not an extraordinary person. But Jesus is an extraordinary person. And he's offering to come and live his life through me by the Spirit. If I will line my heart and life up with God's heart and life, if I live in his power and share in his heart for the lost, then I can know the extraordinary life.

There's an urgent need for the Western church to recapture the centrality of living in the power of the Holy Spirit by faith. We're so familiar with talking about the Spirit. Do we really know how those familiar words work out day by day? Are we, as a family of believers, actually seeking him, following him and drawing on his power moment by moment? Do we know how to?

GALATIANS 2:20

Principle #1: Surrender "I no longer live but Christ lives in me"

So the verse starts with Paul saying "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Just a superficial reading should shout at us that this is a very significant verse. The tricky question is what does it mean? In what sense does Paul no longer live? Well he's obviously talking about his old life.

When we're born again, it really does mean we get a new life through being connected to God. It works very differently from our old life. Being holy is simply a matter of living according to our new life. Simple, but not easy as we're very well trained by our experience and by everything in the world to live in the old way.

How does the old life work? It's very simple. I decide what I want. I come up with a plan to get it, and then I make it happen. It's centred on me and God doesn't get a look in. That's the life that Paul says is dead. By contrast, the new life is very different. I ask 'what does Christ want?' I seek how Christ would have me go about that end and I ask him to empower me as I get on with his business. It's centred on Christ and that old life doesn't get a look in.

That's what it means for Christ to live in me. I align my life with his wishes for me and he empowers my obedience so that our lives are going together in the same direction. His life is expressed through mine. There's something wonderful about this idea of being one heart with God. What he wants is what I want. What I want is what he wants. As that happens, he empowers me to do what he's asked me to do.

What might that old life look like? Maybe I'm coming to the end of school or university and I'm thinking about what to do next. The old life might ask: "What things do I enjoy most? What would give me an affluent, comfortable life?" Or perhaps "What is the most exciting, adventurous thing I can do?" A more religious answer might be "what is the most fulfilling way I can use my gifts and strengths?" The bottom line is what do I want? By contrast the new life asks: "How would God have me serve him? Where are the greatest needs of his body and of the lost? How can I most fully give myself to him?"

Another example. I'm going to share my faith. Do I seek to love and serve the person I meet wherever they are on their journey, or do I use them to try and prove I'm a great evangelist, and very clever and personally impressive as well? Am I seeking God to help me love the person or am I doing my duty? Am I relying on my intellect, my ingenuity and my experience to convince them of the gospel or am I simply seeking to express God's grace and truth to them, trusting him to give my words power and impart new life?

The critical question is whether I'm going to go my own independent way or go his way. The name for this is surrender. My old life, my ambitions, hopes and plans are surrendered to his ambitions, hopes and plans. So that's the first principle. Being surrendered to the will of Christ. Surrender.

Principle #2: Obey "The life I live"

The next thing that Paul says sounds a little paradoxical in light of what came before: "The life I live in the body" he says. Hang on, I thought you were dead! The great mistake that is often made with this verse is to think that if we're dead and Christ is living in us then we can be passive and do nothing. A little reflection shows how ridiculous this is, as if Christ somehow switches us off and does it all himself.

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Now that may sound stupid, but it's amazing how many Christians live like it. I know a lot of people who get quite excited about revival. We profess to want to see the lost saved, and may even pray for it, but we rarely talk to the non-Christians we know about spiritual things. We think "it will just happen when the time is right". Or we talk about the need for more Christian workers, but are we willing to give to make it possible to employ them?

Now I can't save people, but God's appointed means of saving people is for us to love them and to share the gospel with them. Jesus is not passive, and if we're passive, we'll not know the life of Christ flowing through us. His life flows as we obey. And 90% of the obedience that Jesus is looking for is not stuff he'll mysteriously reveal to us but things he's told us in the word. So the first principle is surrender and the second is obey.

Principle #3: Trust *"I live by faith"*

So Paul goes on to explain how he lives: *"The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."* So the third principle is trust. Apart from Christ I can achieve nothing of significance. Nada. Zip. Nothing. Often I feel like I'm investing a lot of effort in achieving nothing. It's the life of Christ empowering my activity that makes all the difference. How does this come? By trusting him to empower me as I obey.

I remember being a part of a mission team at one of the top universities in the US. Every day we'd spend time as a team seeking God and being trained in the mornings. At lunchtime we'd take the five minute walk from our dorms up to the canteen where we'd go and sit down with other students and engage them in conversation.

Now I'm naturally shy so this is a pretty difficult thing for me to do. Every day I had to choose between looking for an excuse to find something more "important" and less uncomfortable to do. I had to surrender my desire for comfort and ease. But there was no use in surrendering but doing nothing. I had to actually take the walk across campus with that sinking feeling in my stomach. I had to buy my lunch, walk over, past the empty tables, to tables with beautiful, brilliant American students on them, introduce myself, sit down and engage them in conversation. I had to actually get on with it and obey.

Every day I would walk across campus and say "Lord, I couldn't do this yesterday and I can't do this again today. Please help me to do what I can't do myself." I had to trust God to give me the boldness to meet people, make friends, and talk with people about spiritual things. Every day I had to trust him. Every day we met great people and had a lot of fun talking about God. But it didn't get easier. Every day I was painfully aware of my own weakness and my need for God to make things happen. Every day he was faithful.

So the principle is this: It's not me for God or God for me, but God through me. It's not God watching me as I summon up all my effort to make things happen. That's burnout. It's not me disengaging and becoming passive and leaving it all to God. That's depression. It's the life of Christ pouring through my life as I surrender, obey and trust. That's an extraordinary life.

It's not me for God. It's not God for me. It's God through me. Let's look at these principles in a story from the gospels.

MATTHEW 14V22-33

"the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it."

The surrendered, obedient, trusting life should be the norm for the Christian. Trouble is, very often the old familiar ways of living creep back in without us even noticing. And they seem to work perfectly well. It's very often only when things start to get difficult that we're woken up to what's really happening. Peter was a fisherman, he knew how to row a boat. This was normal, hardly the occasion for an encounter with God. Autopilot. But tonight was stormy and autopilot wasn't working.

"'Lord, if it's you,' Peter replied, 'tell me to come to you on the water.'"

Is Peter Crazy? This is not a good test. If it's not Jesus, he's in the middle of a deep lake in a storm. He's going to drown. This is my cautious side coming out. But there's something very precious here. We see Peter's heart. He

+ wants to be where Jesus is, doing what his master is doing. This is the surrendered heart. Of the disciples in the boat, only Peter is about to manifest the life of Christ. The heart that wants to be with Jesus, doing what he's doing, is the life that will Jesus will live his life through. And to be where Jesus is, doing what he's doing, is going to take supernatural power. +

“Come,” he said.”

Peter receives a call from Jesus. This is not Peter going off on one on his own. He's been called by Christ to obedience. God doesn't empower our own dreams and strategies. He empowers what he asks us to do. Independence is a trade mark of our old life. We are no longer our own, that luxury isn't ours. The first question in our heart must always be “what is the call of Christ?”

“Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.”

This is not Peter doing it for himself, he can't just vault over the side of the boat and swagger over the sea to Jesus. He'll sink and drown. This is not Jesus doing it for Peter, Jesus hasn't magically caused Peter to levitate up from the boat and float over the water to him, Aladdin-style. Peter gets up, walks to the side of the boat, sits on the side, swings his legs over the edge, feels the spray, lowers himself down onto the water and then puts one foot in front of the other. Jesus empowers him to walk on the water as Peter obeys.

Empowerment always follows obedience. That's the way it works. We don't get the power until we get on with the obedience. And this is a serious exercise in trust. Does Jesus really love Peter? Is Jesus powerful and competent to look after him? If not, Peter will die.

So we see here surrender: Peter wants to be with his master, following him;
Here we see obedience: Peter has to respond and actively obey Jesus' call;
Here we see trust: Peter has to trust Christ to empower him to do what he can't do himself.

“But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.”

Walking with Jesus meant Peter was, in the most literal sense of the word, out of his depth. And suddenly he becomes very aware of it. There's the wind. There are the waves. And there's nothing underneath him. And the old thinking kicks in. Hang on, I can't do this. And his fear caused him to lose sight of Jesus. He abandoned faith and turned back on his own resources, which were woefully inadequate. He was sunk.

Everything was going disastrously wrong. He could die. And suddenly he remembers his Lord and cries out. And Jesus is right there to catch him. God had called Peter beyond himself. Peter had started well, but then panicked, but even in his failure, the Lord was right there with him. God wasn't out to drown Peter, just to wean him off his old life so that an extraordinary life with Jesus would become possible. Jesus wasn't afraid of Peter's failure. The failure would have been to never step out in the first place.

“And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.”

Hang on, why all the wind in the first place? Wouldn't it have been much easier without the wind? Was the wind really necessary? Couldn't the wind have died down before Peter walked on the water? It was a set up! The wind had done its job and could be dismissed. This was a lesson that couldn't have been learned on a calm evening.

“Then those who were in the boat worshiped him”

Note, they didn't worship Peter. It was public knowledge that Peter wasn't super-buoyant. But Peter's stumbling, obedient walk of faith was enough to connect the supernatural reality of Jesus with their own experience. His testimony and life caused others to worship God. That's amazing. That's an extraordinary life. That's a life that counts for something. That's a life of loving, faithful obedience to Christ. That's the life that brings others to find salvation in Jesus. And Peter's pretty ordinary too!





CONCLUSION



Not us for God (God passive)

The Christian life and making disciples is not about us summoning up superhuman effort, ingenuity, will power and endurance to try and attempt something extraordinary for God. That's fleshy effort.

Not God for us (Us passive)

Neither is it about us sitting back and doing a few spiritual things we enjoy, waiting for God to fulfil the Great Commission for us. That's spiritualised disobedience.

But God Through us (God active in our activity)

It's about surrendering ourselves fully to God and to his purposes, holding nothing back. It's about thoughtfully and practically addressing ourselves to the question of how will we obey what he has called us to do. It's about trusting him moment by moment to empower what we do, knowing that otherwise it's useless bustle. It's about the life of Christ being active in our activity. It's about walking day by day by faith.

Our life is aligned with God's life as we surrender, obey and trust

The extraordinary life is on offer. God has called us to bear much fruit. God has called us to get Jesus to everyone everywhere. God has called us to be part of the re-evangelisation of the UK and Western Europe. God has called us to raise up labourers for the worldwide fulfilment of the Great Commission. God has called us to the harvest. We can't do this for him. He won't do this for us. If we walk with him, he will do it through us.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- Are there any areas of my life which are unsundered to God and bear the marks of my old life?
- Am I clear about God's call on my life today?
- Are there any steps of obedience that I need to take?
- Where am I actually trusting God in my life at the moment and where do I need to?
- What does "the extraordinary life" mean for me?
- Are there any areas of sin in my life which would inhibit the flow of the life of Christ through my life?

