

WALKING IN GOD'S POWER

I'll let you into a little secret. I want to live an extraordinary life. I really do. The best that the world has doesn't look that good to me. I dream of something more. I dream of living a life that really counts for something. I dream of being the sort of person who really 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 that 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 anaesthetised 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 seems full of possibilities. Creation drips with beauty and mystery. People seem wonderful creatures of God and 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 with no more mourning or crying or pain.

Question. Which perspective 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 Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 5 says something quite amazing: "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 small 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 some 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 is more real to me than the world of my 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 with you a verse that offers true hope:

Galatians 2v20: "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."

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If there's hope for me to grasp this extraordinary life, then this is at 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 we hold together the life of God by the Spirit and the heart of God in mission then God will do extraordinary things through our lives.

I think there's an urgent need for us to recapture the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. It's not about striving to do good and be nice. It's about Jesus living his life through me. We're so familiar with talking about the Spirit. Do we really know how those familiar words work out day by day? Are we actually seeking him, following him and drawing on his power moment by moment? Do we really know how to? Let's get into Galatians 2v20.

GALATIANS 2V20

"I no longer live but Christ lives in me"

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? 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 a matter of living according to our new life. Simple, but not easy as I'm very well trained by my experience and by everything in the world to live in the old way.

How does the old life work? 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, it depends 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 and I ask him to empower me as I get on with it. It's centred on Christ and my old life doesn't get a look in.

That's what it means for Christ to live in me. I line up 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 my life. 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. I'm freed from all the confusion, anxiety, complexity and ultimately futility that come from having to justify to myself going against what I know to be God's will

What might these two lives look like when it comes to my diary? I'm thinking about what I'm going to invest my time in over the coming term. The old life might ask: "What do I most enjoy doing? What gives me greatest satisfaction? What's easiest? What do others expect me to do?" The new life asks: "What is most important to God? How can I best invest what he's entrusted to me? How can I fulfil the calling he's given to me and express His love to those He's put in my life?"

Or another example. I'm going out to share my faith. Do I seek to serve the person I meet wherever they are on their journey, or do I need them to validate my evangelism? Am I seeking God to help me love the person I'm meeting 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 the Spirit 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.

"The life I live"

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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 Paul, I thought you were dead! The great mistake that’s often made with this verse is to think that if we’re dead and Christ is living in us, we can be passive and do nothing. A little reflection shows how ridiculous this is. As if Christ just switches us off and lives our life for us.

That may sound stupid, but it’s amazing how many Christians live like it. I know people who profess to be excited about revival and seeing the lost saved, and may even pray for it, but rarely talk to the non-Christians they 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 support them financially?

Now I can’t save people, but God’s primary appointed means of saving people is for me 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 him. And 90% of the obedience that Jesus is looking for is not stuff he will mysteriously reveal to us but things he’s told us in the word. So the first principle is surrender and the second is obey.

“I live by faith”

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.” The third principle is trust. Apart from Christ I can achieve nothing of significance. Nada. Zip. Nothing. Often I feel I’m investing a lot of effort in achieving nothing. It’s Christ’s Spirit empowering my activity that makes all the difference. How does this come? By trusting him to empower me as I obey.

I remember leading a mission team at a very prestigious university in the US. Every day we would do training in the morning in our dorms. At lunchtime we would take the five minute walk across the beautiful campus to the dining hall. We would buy our food, walk past all the empty tables and introduce ourselves to the beautiful and brilliant students and chat whilst eating lunch. For some people this was easy, but not for me.

I’m naturally shy and towards the end of every training session my mind would race around 101 very good reasons why I, as project leader, had something important that needed to be done rather than go to the canteen. Every day I had to choose not to give way to my fear, to give in to the urge to keep everything comfortable, and go to the dining hall. Every day as we walked up I would pray “Lord, I couldn’t do this yesterday, and I still can’t do this today.” Every day we met students, made great friends and had significant conversations about Jesus. Every day I felt my old life pulling me away and I had to choose to ignore it and obey the call of Christ. Every day I had to trust God to help me to do what I couldn’t do myself. Every day God 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

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

+ *“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”*

“Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 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. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

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

The surrendered, obedient, trusting life is supposed to be the norm for those who follow Jesus. The trouble is that the old familiar ways of living creep back in without us 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 and the disciples were fishermen. They knew how to row a boat. This was normal, hardly the occasion for an encounter with God. They were on autopilot.

““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 and life that wants to be with Jesus, doing what Jesus is doing, is the life that will Jesus will live his life through. And to be where Jesus is, doing what Jesus 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’re no longer our own. The first question in our heart must be “what’s the call of Christ?”

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

This isn’t 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 doesn’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 of the waves on his body, 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 gets on with the practicalities of obeying him.

Empowerment 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; obedience: Peter has to respond and actively obey Jesus’ call; and trust: Peter has to trust Christ to empower him to do what he cannot 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. Suddenly he remembers his Lord and cries out. Jesus is right there to catch him. God called Peter beyond himself. Peter had started well, but then panicked, but even in his failure, Jesus was right there with him. God wasn't out to drown Peter, just to wean him off his own competence so that an extraordinary life with Jesus would become possible. Jesus wasn't afraid of Peter's failure. The failure would have been not to step out of the boat.

"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 played its part and could be dismissed. Trust an Englishman to comment on the weather!

"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 stumbling testimony and life caused others to worship God. That's amazing. That's an extraordinary life. That's a life that counts. That's a life of loving, faithful obedience to Christ. That's the life that brings others to find salvation in Jesus. And Peter was pretty ordinary!

CONCLUSION

Not us for God (God passive)

Living life under the call of God is not about us summoning up superhuman effort, ingenuity, willpower 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, passively waiting for God to fulfil the Great Commission. 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 working out how we'll obey what he's 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 Christ being active in our activity. It's about walking by faith day by day, moment by moment.

Our life is aligned with Gods as we surrender, obey and trust

The extraordinary life really is on offer from Jesus for you today. God has called us to bear much fruit. God has called us to take the love and grace of 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 we'll walk with him, he will do it through us.

Some questions for reflection:

- Are there any areas of my life which are not surrendered to God and bear the marks of my old life?
- Am I clear about God's call on my life now?
- What are the practical 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?