

Understanding the Christian Life *“Life as a Journey”*

Introduction:

One does not have to be a Christian very long before one begins to have a pretty good general idea about what sort of life God wants us to live. Throughout the Bible it is made very clear that God desires His people to be morally virtuous in every aspect of their lives. However, though God’s expectations for His people are generally understood by those who call themselves Evangelical Christians, surveys indicate that many Evangelical Christians feel they are failing to live the lives that God wants them to live, and many have grown so weary of failing at this pursuit, they have given up even trying to achieve any measurable amount of holiness. Such Christians volunteer that they feel defeated by sin, that they continue to have the same moral struggles they had when they were first converted, and that they have not experienced any significant spiritual growth for many years, despite having invested time and effort toward that goal.

Part of the explanation is most likely that some of the respondents to these surveys have unrealistic expectations about the sort of changes a growing Christian will experience. However, the significant percentage of Evangelicals who feel they are failing seems to indicate that there is more going on than simply misunderstanding what growth in holiness feels like. A fair question we should all ask ourselves is, do I feel that I am experiencing a reasonable amount of growth in moral holiness? If not, then there are only two explanations. One, that a person is not seriously trying to pursue that growth. Two, and more likely, a person does not genuinely understand what the Scriptures teach about how one succeeds in spiritual growth. This may seem hard to believe, given how most Evangelical churches for many decades now have devoted a significant amount of their teaching to what is referred to as practical instruction, focusing on how to live as a Christian. But the explanation for this phenomenon lies in the nature of how this practical instruction is given. The weakness in many current “*practical*” sermons is an almost exclusive focus on specific behaviors or attitudes. The weakness this represents is found in the old saying “*you can’t see the forest for the trees*”. The idea embedded in this saying is that one is so focused on the details that it causes one to miss the big picture (the overall context in which the details exist). In any discipline or subject matter, understanding the big picture is critically important. It is the big picture that helps a person understand where the details fit in and why. Absent this big picture, the details are unconnected to one another and the instruction quickly becomes a series of unrelated lectures. The result is that the most recent instruction erases one’s memory of that which preceded it.

So, the goal in these studies will be to explore all that the Bible teaches about the life that God wants us to live, but in a way that builds one piece on another while maintaining the overall context of all that instruction. The result will be a comprehensive theology of Christian living that will hopefully provide Christians

with the tools they need to understand the process of spiritual growth, and how to succeed in that pursuit.

I. Recognizing a Pervasive Metaphor:

Many of the truths of Scripture are presented to us using metaphors so that we can have a better and practical understanding of the abstract truths that it teaches. This includes what the Bible teaches about the Christian life. Metaphors are used to enable the reader to better conceptualize both the nature of the Christian life and how one can successfully apply the instruction it provides.

Throughout the Scriptures the course of our lives is pictured as a journey down a road or a pathway (the use of these metaphors is particularly prominent in wisdom literature). These metaphorical expressions were intended to help us visualize many important truths about how to live one's life. The specific vocabulary that we find used most often in this metaphorical teaching are the words "*way*", and "*walk*".

But why did God inspire the authors of Scripture to employ this metaphor? It was because the language of walking on a journey resonated strongly with almost everyone's daily lives. In the ancient world, life was built around walking. Only the rich, or certain kinds of soldiers would regularly ride on an animal, or ride in a vehicle pulled by an animal. The average person would walk to get to his work (whether in a shop or in the fields), to meet with other people, to travel to a nearby town, or to go just about anywhere on land. And in doing this, a person would normally have at least a general route in mind that was to be taken, whenever they travelled somewhere near or far. The reason for citing this is because in our modern world, walking from place to place is not a major part of our lives. Because of the difference between our lifestyles and that of those who lived during the ages when the Old and New Testament were being written, this metaphor does not impact our thinking in the same way that it impacted those who lived then. Because of the realities of ancient life, this metaphor made a lot of sense to those who lived at that time. Everything they did involved walking somewhere. So, picturing life as a journey was a natural metaphor. For modern Christians then, it is helpful to grasp the significance of this metaphor, so that we can better understand the nature of the Christian life from God's perspective.

There are literally hundreds of verses that employ this metaphor. The verses listed below demonstrate just how pervasive this language is in the Bible, and how it is used in reference to every facet of the Christian life:

"Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass."
Psalm 37:5

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way"
Isaiah 53:6ab

"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."
Isaiah 55:7

“Therefore, we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

Romans 6:4

“that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

Romans 8:4

“For we walk by faith, not by sight”

II Corinthians 5:7

“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh”

II Corinthians 10:3

“I say then: Walk in the Spirit and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh”

Galatians 5:16

“If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit”

Galatians 5:25

“This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind”

Ephesians 4:17

II. Understanding How to Apply the Metaphor:

This language that pictures our lives as a journey we travel on foot was chosen to illustrate the truth that the Christian life is not something that becomes a part of our lives, or one thing out of many that occupies our attentions, it is something that is meant to characterize every aspect of our lives. This journey is the very definition of what our lives are all about. In addition, the intent in the use of this metaphor is to remind the reader of important truisms about life:

- Every life will lead to some destination (either good or bad)
- If one wishes to arrive at a specific destination, one must be intentional about the path that one takes
- If one wishes to travel safely then one needs to choose a path that avoids dangerous territory
- It is also important if one wishes to ensure a safe journey that one chooses travelling companions wisely
- And this metaphor teaches that deviating from the proper path can result in not getting where one is going, or it can result in making the journey more difficult than it needed to be

A. Every Journey has a Destination:

The reality is that every journey takes a person somewhere. In the ancient world, life was so busy, few people would simply wander around aimlessly with no place to go. Even in our time, it is fairly rare for someone to do this. Even in

recreation, one normally takes a walk to go from one place to another. Therefore, the first truism that this metaphor conveys about life is that everyone's life is heading toward some destination. Since this is true, it is good to ask oneself three questions. One, where is my life journey taking me? Two, do I want to end up at that destination? Three, is there another destination I would prefer? In what we have called "*the Sermon on the Mount*", Jesus warned that everyone needs to understand where the path of life is leading them. And that in the end, all lives are headed to one of two ultimate destinations:

"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Matthew 7:13-14

Jesus taught that a person's life path is leading either to eternal destruction or to eternal life. He added that the majority of people will choose the easier and more attractive path that leads to destruction, because the life path that leads to life is both restrictive and demanding. Later, in a private teaching session with the twelve, Jesus clarified an important truth about the narrow way:

"Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'."

John 14:5-6

Thomas' question was rooted in an admission of ignorance. He did not how to find the pathway that would lead him and his fellow apostles to the eternal dwelling place that Jesus was speaking about. Jesus' response clarified that the path of life that would lead to that eternal dwelling place was found in Him. Later, the Apostle John, summarizing the message of his gospel, clarified how Jesus is the way to eternal life:

"And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

John 20:30-31

It is informative to note that in the first century, the Christian life itself became known as "*the Way*" (Acts 24:14).

B. Every Journey Involves Choosing a Direction in which to Travel:

A second truism that is taught through the use of the metaphor of life as a journey is that in order for one to get to their desired destination, one must choose the path that will take you in that direction. This metaphor was used repeatedly to illustrate that every life path is headed in some direction, each person's responsibility is to choose the path that will genuinely take them where they wish

to go. For the path one chooses will determine where one will end up. Many passages remind the reader to be attentive to where a given path will take them:

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners”

Psalm 1:1a

“For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.”

Psalm 1:6

“Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil.”

Proverbs 4:14

“He who keeps instruction is in the way of life, but he who refuses correction goes astray.”

Proverbs 10:17

“The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but He loves him who follows righteousness. Harsh discipline is for him who forsakes the way, And he who hates correction will die.”

Proverbs 15:9-10

“The highway of the upright is to depart from evil; he who keeps his way preserves his soul.”

Proverbs 16:17

These verses teach that there are two distinct directions in life. One that is characterized by wickedness, and another that is characterized by righteousness. And these distinct paths inevitably lead to specific destinations. Therefore, the nature of the path reveals where that path will take a person. For those who wish to find acceptance with God, one is required to make the conscious choice to distance oneself from evil, and to embrace what is morally good (according to God). In doing this, the righteous person “*preserves*” his or her soul. The Hebrew word translated as “*preserves*” refers to guarding, protecting, or keeping careful watch over something. In this case the one who chooses a life path that moves away from involvement with evil is making a choice that will protect his or her soul from mortal danger.

As one ponders what it means to live life as a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is vital to understand that the way to eternal life and godliness is not simply a matter of making a few right choices, it is a matter of having one’s entire life transformed by Jesus Christ so that the old life is left behind, and we embrace an entirely new way of life, a righteous life that is only possible by being intimately connected to Jesus Christ:

“But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former

conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

Ephesians 4:20-24

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you and the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

John 15:4-5

C. Every Journey Carries the Potential of Going the Wrong Way:

This represents the third lesson that is taught through the use of the metaphor of life as a journey. In the Book of Proverbs, we read the following warning:

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

Proverbs 14:12

In the verse above, we are told that the path of our life’s journey is leading us to an inevitable destination and that this destination can be far different than what we imagine it to be. Specifically, a person can believe that they are on a life path that will lead them to what is best and beneficial for them and yet be genuinely deceived. At times the truth will prove to be that a person’s chosen path to happiness and fulfillment is actually a path that will lead them to ultimate destruction. In another proverb we read:

“the way of the fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise.”

Proverbs 12:15

In wisdom literature, a “*fool*” is someone who acts in a way that is contrary to wisdom and discerning. Normally, it speaks not so much about someone who is incapable of acting wise, but rather it speaks about someone who refuses to listen to wisdom and instruction. Therefore, the term has moral connotations. The same basic warning is given in different words in the New Testament:

“If we say we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”

I John 1:6-7

The point in this teaching is that each person is responsible to evaluate the path of their life to make sure that it will genuinely take them where they wish to go, recognizing the reality that there is often deceit involved in the way of ruin.

D. This Journey Should Involve Receiving Proper Guidance:

A question that must be answered as we seek to walk the narrow path of life in Christ, is, how does one discern that one is walking along the right path? After all, there are many options presented to us in this world (by both Christians and non-Christians alike), and the proponents of each one claim that their way is the correct path. Answering this question is critical. After all, the verses we just read have warned us that unless we use wisdom, we can be deceived into choosing the wrong path when we think we have chosen the right one. The answer is that God has given us the resource we need so that we can wisely discern whether or not a life path is one that we should take. That resource is the Bible. The Scriptures were given to us not only so we might recognize the right path at first, but also so we can continue to recognize it so that we will be able to stay on that right path as it winds its way to its ultimate destination. The psalmist reminds us that:

“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD!”

Psalm 119:1

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Psalm 119:105

Therefore, in order to understand the life to which we are called, we are to see that the Scriptures are in a sense our road map so that we can travel along the path that leads toward the life that God intends for us. As we seek to live a life that pleases God, we need the Scriptures to direct our way and help us to identify the correct course to take from all the potential misdirection that we will encounter as we go forward in our lives.

Since the knowledge of truth lies outside of ourselves, it means that we must have a basic distrust of our own inclinations about life and recognize that an initial part of our call as disciples is to accept that as we enter this journey, we are filled with many false ideas about life. This is complicated by the reality that we do not even know for sure where our ignorance and misunderstandings lie. So, in a sense we begin our journey lost and disoriented. But knowing this is the first part of our re-education regarding how we should live. A dangerous temptation that many succumb to is that they never acknowledge just how terribly wrong their thinking was as an unbeliever. Instead, a person like this embraces the erroneous idea that they only need a few mild adjustments to their thinking and beliefs. If this characterizes one's Christian journey, it will result in them taking the broad destructive path, rather than the narrow one that leads to abundance of life. This is because our former path of life was rooted in many false ideas and assumptions.

Given the spiritual realities that lie behind our conversion, our commitment must be to put our trust not in our own inclinations, but only in the truth that is revealed in God's Word. Everything else we hear or are exposed to must be evaluated in light of the truth we find in God's Word before it can be accepted. That does not mean that the Bible addresses every subject, but rather that it gives us a grid

through which we can have an understanding regarding the parameters of truth for every subject. Thus, we read the following practical admonition:

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.”

Proverbs 3:5-6

The Scriptures are full of references about how we need Divine guidance if we are to successfully live the life that God has designed for us:

“Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make Your way straight before my face.”

Psalms 5:8

“Show me Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths... The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way.”

Psalms 25:4, 9

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.”

Psalms 32:8

“You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.”

Psalms 73:24

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties ; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”

Psalms 139:23-24

“I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the right paths”

Proverbs 4:11

“Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘this is the way, walk in it’, wherever you turn to the right hand”

Isaiah 30:21

“The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.”

Isaiah 58:11

“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.”

John 16:13

E. This Journey Involves Following Someone:

In the New Testament, an important principle about the Christian life is revealed. Not only do we obey the guidance we receive from God, but our new life in Christ also involves the ongoing commitment to follow Jesus Christ as He leads us in the direction of an entirely different life than the one we were living before we turned to Him. Our lives are never meant to be the same again. This doesn't mean we aren't involved in some of the same basic duties of life as before, it means that every part of our life is changed because it is measured by what God is, and what our lord Jesus Christ instructs us to do. This is in distinction to how the world at large operates, doing what is popular according to the culture or counterculture in which one lives.

The following verses show that our path of life is defined by following the teachings and example of Jesus Christ:

"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

John 8:12

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.'"

Matthew 16:24

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."

John 10:27

"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us as a pattern."

Philippians 3:17

"And you became followers of us and of the Lord"

I Thessalonians 1:6a

"You have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance"

II Timothy 3:10

This idea is particularly highlighted in the following verses:

"For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings"

Hebrews 2:10

"Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith"

Hebrews 12:2a

In these verses the author of Hebrews uses a title to refer to Jesus that is quite instructive. The Greek term refers to someone who establishes both a destination

and a path to that destination in order to lead others to the destination. A good English equivalent is that He has the role of a pathfinder, who provides both salvation and the way by which a person gains that salvation. The inherent idea in this title is that He leads His people into the salvation that He Himself established. This re-enforces the idea that our lives as Christians is characterized by following Christ, not just as an initial choice, but as a daily exercise.

F. This Journey Involves Consequences for Ignoring Guidance:

The final principle taught through this metaphor is that human beings are to be aware that there are serious consequences if one ignores the guidance that God has given to us in His word:

“So I gave them over to their stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels”
Psalm 81:12

“He who keeps instruction is in the way of life, but he who refuses correction goes astray.”
Proverbs 10:17

“He who disdains instruction despises his own soul, but he who heeds rebuke gets understanding”
Proverbs 15:32

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine; and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who has built his house on the rock; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell, and great was its fall.”
Matthew 7:26-27

“He who rejects this, does not reject man, but God”
I Thessalonians 4:8

Conclusion:

If we are to succeed in our pursuit of the abundant life that Christ promised, we must understand that we have embarked on a completely different life journey than the rest of the world is on. This journey requires more than a simple affirmation that Christ is our Savior. It involves believing this to be an absolute fact. And that belief includes the conviction that we must build our entire lives around Him as He leads us on the pathway that leads us to that abundant life that we can enjoy both now and in the world to come.