

The Examined Life

Christ and No More | Bryce Beale | June 3, 2018

Some say the unexamined life is not worth living. They are right.

We are all alike born into this world apart from our requesting it, but once here we should discover why. Those who do not attempt the discovery move from one little purpose to another, like a traveler content to reach each rest stop without determining a destination. There is a small joy in the bare experience of the in-between—but the in-between is only an in-between if there is a start and a finish. Otherwise the in-between is the finish.

But in life, we know that the in-between is not the finish. The thousand little purposes we set our faces toward—an education, a job, a promotion, a spouse, a family—are moving us toward something else. And it would be a grief to pass eastward through a lifetime of rest stops only to discover, at the end of it all, that the destination we would rather have reached is in the west.

A horribly concrete example of this unexamined journey is repeated every day by businessmen who lose their families. No father imagines, when he holds his newborn child in his arms, that he will one day alienate this child by his work ethic. That is not the destination he intends. But he plods along in that direction one landmark at a time—one more meeting, one more trip, one more late evening. And with every success in this direction, he distances himself from the other. He did not stop to look at the whole map. His family is the price.

But imagine that he did examine his life and decide that a close family, rather than a successful career, was the destination for him. Imagine he devoted himself entirely in that direction and came to the cusp of reaching it. The only gap remaining to traverse is found in this conundrum, that he is a German man of 1942 and his family will not seal their love for him unless he seals his allegiance to Nazism.

Here is an examined life with a decided end, but the end is not worthy of the life. An unexamined life is not worth living, but neither is an examined life with an unworthy end. Family is good, as are many things, but it is not best.

The one life worth living is the examined life with a destination that is best, that is ultimate, that is entirely capable of embracing the soul that pursues it. Find which direction is best and move in that direction—that is life indeed! Everything else is a walking and breathing death.

The argument of this class is that Christ is that one worthy destination. He is best, he is ultimate. And the only worthy life is the one that moves landmark to landmark in his direction. If you are curious as to the landmarks and where they may be found, I offer this series of classes as the humble beginning of an answer.

But if you are not yet convinced of Christ as the proper destination for a human soul, I offer this particular lesson.

For although a third of the world consents to the theory that Christ is best, only a minute fraction of that third practices the theory. I have little interest in an unpracticed theory; we are not permitted enough span of life to dabble in ideas so bland that they guide no real part of our lives.

If you could pull open the panel of pretense that covers the operating center of almost all inhabitants of the earth, I am certain you would find Protagoras' very old maxim: "Man is the measure of all things." The ultimate is not Christ, but we ourselves. We think this notion was resurrected in the European Renaissance, but that is not true. The idea never died. There have only ever been two contenders for the human destination: Christ and us. And the direction most individuals walk, Christian or otherwise, does not have Christ at its end.

This is a tragedy! If there were a stronger word within my immediate reach, I would use it. We will never be substantial enough to be our own ends and aims. We are as flimsy a goal as work or family, for these are really ourselves with masks on. If you find yourself dissatisfied with life you may blame the condition on whatever you like, but I promise it is a consequence of this: either you have not properly examined your direction and are wandering along, or you have chosen as your destination anything other than Christ.

Paul's pursuit

But to choose Christ as the destination and to continue doggedly in pursuit requires more than a moment of emotion. It requires many, many moments of emotion, and some moments of no emotion at all, but of painful determination. In either case—that of passion and that of persistence—the mind is the engine. You can have Christ as your North Star and sail with and against the wind in his direction all your life if you see the star and think it worth following. The distance between one man's empty life and another's full one is not so far as we might imagine—a mere shift of perspective, a slight leaning of conviction one inch to the right or the left, and the line is crossed.

Therefore, if you desire an examined life with a worthy end and want to walk that way day by day, landmark by landmark, you must above all else be convinced, in the realm of thought, of the worthy end. I contend

that the only worthy end is Christ; but it is not enough to contend, I must also try to convince.

So, as a sort of first argument I offer a biography. I will further displease scientists and logicians by appealing to statistics, but biography and statistics, if they are not proof, are at least suggestions. The biography I offer is that of Paul the Apostle, ranked by a 2013 article in *Time* as the 34th most significant figure in history—above many kings and philosophers—and mouthpiece of Jesus, ranked first on the list.¹ By common consent, Paul did not waste his life.

Born north of Palestine to a Jewish family, Paul descended on the region early in life to be trained in Judaism's capital, Jerusalem, by one of her foremost instructors. He surpassed his peers in his ambition. A contemporary of Jesus, he attempted to stamp out this man's followers who, in his opinion, were deceived. Then in the matter of a few days he threw to the wind his fame, his friends, his prospects of income and advancement—in short, his whole life. He became a follower of Christ.

What came afterward was a hard life, marked by unusual suffering and loss as he traveled the ancient Mediterranean world proclaiming Christ. Few of history's men or women have ever fallen so far from humanity's graces into humanity's contempt. Yet he is not remembered for what he lost, but for what he thought of what he lost. He wrote, "whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."²

For Paul, Christ occupied the highest seat of office, the seat of a first principle or of an ultimate aim; the world and its contents were like a shoe, negligible except insofar as they advanced Christ's cause. In a few bright days his eyes were opened to Christ, and the proof was a lifetime in one direction. Nothing diverted him from the westward trail, no clouds obscured the star by which he navigated the ship of soul. Once he knew for whom to live the how followed—whatever deviates from the path is worthless and must be discarded.

A good mother many centuries afterward would articulate the same singlemindedness in her definition of sin: "Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, takes off your relish for spiritual things, whatever increases the

¹ Steven Skiena and Charles B. Ward, "Who's Biggest? The 100 Most Significant Figures in History," *Time Web Site*, Time Inc. (Dec. 10, 2013; accessed May 5, 2018).

² Phil. 3:7-8.

authority of the body over the mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may seem in itself.”³

You must not consider this manner of life narrow in any bad way. A manner of life is always narrow, since we can only move in one direction at a time. The question is, “Are we moving in the right direction?” If so, though the path be necessarily narrow, it will be rich and right. A path is only as good as the object toward which it aims, and if that object is Christ then the way to him, though confined to one current of the sea, leads through the richest and the deepest of all currents imaginable.

Paul’s mind in the matter is a first argument—he proved by his life that his doctrine was doable, that one could set their gaze on Christ alone and live a life consistent with that aim.

Christ is God

As a second argument, I summon an objection to my claim: “Isn’t it narrow to make Christ the goal? Shouldn’t God be the goal?”

I am tempted to offer a concession, for (and here I offer it) the Triune God cannot be divided into parts, and as an undivided whole the three members together deserve our full attention. But I am tempted also to retract that concession, not because it is not true, but because it may be used to prop up a false and unhelpful perspective. We ought to aim for God alone because he cannot be divided into parts, true; yet for that very reason we ought to aim for Christ. For Christ is God.

The pluralist who is more comfortable speaking of God because God is universal while Christ is a local deity of the West—and the non-pluralist who has shifted his perspective to match the pattern—not only misunderstands Christ, but misunderstands God. “No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.”⁴ The two are more one than we assume.

Philip thought Christ narrow, and asked to see the Father. He misunderstood how inseparable the Son is from the Father and the Spirit. The person who makes Christ his one aim makes God his one aim; how can you say, “Let us have God as our aim instead of Christ, and it is enough for us”? Have you been so long with the Savior and still do not know him? Most of us are closet Arians, not out of malice but from a perspective of Christ just a bit too leeward. God seems a great and broad object; Christ a great and narrow one. This narrow view of Christ is not ended when you consent to the councils of early Christendom; at that point its ending has just begun.

³ Susanna Wesley, ?.

⁴ 1 Jn. 2:23 (ESV).

It is true that some, long ago and today, have wanted to destroy the distinctions within the Trinity—they have said for example that Christ is only a manifestation of God, who at one time shows himself as the Father, at another time as the Spirit, and at another as the Son. You might diagnose this heresy as broadening Christ too much, to make him more God than he is; but you would be wrong. The heretic narrows Christ as much as the pluralist, for the heretic makes Christ *only* a manifestation of the divine, and the pluralist makes him *only* one deity among many. But Christ is more than a mere manifestation—he is fully and integrally God. And he is more than merely a deity—he is the deity.

I cannot convince you to set Christ over above every other purpose unless, in conviction as much as in creed, you believe him to be very God of very God, and that “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”⁵ If our faces are truly unveiled before God, it is only because God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God *in the face of Jesus Christ*.”⁶ And we must keep looking at that glory in that face if we are to be transformed from one degree of glory to another. Our perspective of Christ as narrow—in any way narrow—cannot bear the weight of one month of our lives, much less an entire lifetime.

The details of what you will hear in this class are important, but none of them are more important than this assertion, that Christ is God. It has been said that a mother and father who love each other well cannot parent poorly, for they have attained to the first principle of family. Similarly, the Christian who is confident of Christ’s deity on a real-life level cannot waste his life, because his North Star shines brightly in the firmament of his mind and he will move in its direction.

The reason many who affirm Christ’s deity do not move northward is because they know his Godhood as data, but not as truth. Said more briefly, they do not know his Godhood. They are like the two disciples met by Jesus on the road after his resurrection; they do not recognize him. When he speaks, their heart burns because they know beyond the data of “Jesus is God” is a living truth; behind the binary of 1’s and 0’s is a world of cataracts and caves, of misty ocean breezes and distant seagull calls. The world is there, and they will see it when their eyes are opened.

For everyone thinks he sees the whole picture until he flies in an airplane and looks down on the whole picture. Everyone assumes she sees as much as can be seen until she sees, for the first time, what she has not seen—billboards in another language, for example, or interstellar columns of dust and gas in the far reaches of space. Every

⁵ Col. 2:9.

⁶ 2 Cor. 4:6; emphasis mine.

Christian believes that Jesus is God; some believe it from the ground, and some believe it from the sky. Some see the fact through their eyelids, like the Emmaus-bound disciples, while others open their eyes on the Mount of Transfiguration and then fall to the ground.

So we are not surprised when Paul prays “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened.”⁷

I do not mean to elucidate here what we may do to shift our perspective from Christ-as-God to Christ-as-very-God—I make that the purpose of future lessons—but perhaps one of Paul’s proverbs will begin to light the way: “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.” On the one hand, we must accept the possibility that our view of Christ is too narrow, even if we have an orthodox Christology. On the other, love for Christ must make this not a discouraging thought but one that drives our pursuit of him all the more. If we like Philip have failed to comprehend Christ-as-very-God we must, like the Greeks to Philip, say, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” The wish is the first step, for the wish lifts Christ up from the realm of general interests toward the altar of our ultimate aim.

Christ then is the worthy object of the examined life, because he is God. There is not space in this lesson—or this class or this world—to adequately prove why God should be the final object of your existence. If you are not convinced he should be, I hope he might use the arguments of this class, and of the Bible, and of your life to convince you.⁸ But that convincing is not my particular purpose. My purpose is to show why Christ should be the sole object of your life, and my argument is that he should be that object because he is God.

Conclusion

Jesus is the only worthy end of the examined life. Two ends are no more allowed than two masters; but two ends are not needed, for who would the other be? When Paul speaks of the “surpassing value of knowing Christ” he means that no other worthy end is possible beside Christ himself. Does a satisfied life require that we pursue and attain Christ and also wealth? Can safety share the seat with Jesus as our goal? What of fame, reputation, general approval and particular love? Pleasures and

⁷ Eph. 1:17-18.

⁸ Helpful resources in this regard come from the pen of Jonathan Edwards (especially *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*) and of his modern-day elaborator, John Piper.

beauties of this world? To what will you compare Christ, or where is his equal?

I have tried in this lesson to begin to convince you that you will throw away your life if you do not throw away whatever in your heart competes with Christ for first place, for ultimate aim. I do not know if I have succeeded. I hope you have at least examined yourself by the question, "What am I living for?" If not, I hope you will now.

The lessons that follow are for those who have decided to follow Jesus and him alone, no turning back. They are for the few who choose an examined life with a worthy end. And my dream for them is that in God's hand they may be means by which you are pulled along landmark to landmark toward the North Star of Christ. They will continue the plea of this lesson, namely, that Christ must be our only aim—and they will continue that plea for the simple reason that we always need that plea renewed in our ears. But they will also build upon it in what I hope will be practical ways.

My prayer is that in your inmost person, and evidenced by your outer one, will be a single and absorbing vision of Christ, and no more.