



## Living with our Limitations

The Christian life is in many ways a paradoxical life. By this we mean that the Christian's life is full of apparent contradictions. As believers we are *'in the world but not of it'* (John 17:14-15). Sin is in us but we are not in sin. We belong to a world of perfection shortly to be revealed, but we are at present full of imperfections. We rejoice and yet we also groan. Heaven is begun in our hearts, but hell has not yet entirely lost its influence upon us. We are surrounded by angels and yet also tempted by devils. We are perfectly justified but not perfectly sanctified.

The Christian's life in this world is a sort of interim-life or in-between-life. We are not what we were but we are also not what we would be and shall be. We are absent from the Christ whom we long to see because we are at present still coming up out of the wilderness. Heaven is in our hearts and in our mind's eye but we are as yet still far from home and amid many dangerous enemies. We are therefore at peace with God but must always be on the watch. We are safe but only so long as we keep awake. We cannot lose our salvation but we may, through carelessness or idleness, lose some of our reward (2 John 8; Rev. 3:11).

We are at present in a state of transition. God has not finished his work in us as yet. But when God's work concerning us is complete we shall be all that we ought to be and all that we now long to be. *'He knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold'* (Job 23:10). As yet, we are still like ore that is being smelted, or earthen pots being glazed in the furnace, or fruit on the tree which is not fully ripe.

The Christian life in this present world is one in which we are being 'processed' or prepared. A daily alteration is going on within us which is not going on in the non-Christian. He is changing only in the sense that the principles of sin and death, which were in him at birth, are gaining ground on him and will one day overtake him. But there are forces and powers at work in the believer which are raising him to ever new heights of spiritual life and knowledge.

*'We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.'*

(2 Cor 3:18)

It is remarkable that the Scriptures repeatedly say that the Christian is now in a state which is advancing and progressing. We go, so the Bible says, *'from glory to glory'* (2 Cor. 3:18). We advance *'from strength to strength'* (Ps. 84:7). We receive out of Christ's fulness *'grace for grace'* (John 1:16). Our life is progressive in terms also of the degree of our believing. It is moving *'from faith to faith'* (Rom. 1:17). All such expressions are a reminder to us that our present life is one of process, maturing, preparation and development. The fully mature state has not yet arrived, but it is in view even now while we are still green and unripe. All our experiences of growing are pledges of perfection in a better state and in a better world.

The Christian's life is therefore the reverse of the non-Christian's. The one is moving towards perfection in glory; the other to final and irretrievable loss. The believer will in the end be ripe for heaven; the other for eternal misery in hell. The one is soon to be a *'vessel of mercy unto honour'*; the other a *'vessel of wrath fitted to destruction'* (Rom. 9:21-23). Soon, all the good things which godless men enjoy will be but haunting memories of good things lost forever. In their ears will sound the doleful words, *'Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things'* (Luke 16:25).

The believer's present life is therefore like the spring-time. He can look forward to summer days coming soon. The sinner's life is like the autumn of the year. The plentiful fruits which he now enjoys will not last. Winter days are at hand.

The more the Christian lives close to Christ, the more he will become aware of the paradoxical nature of his life here below. No-one expresses it so vividly as the Apostle Paul in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

*'We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you.'*

(2 Cor. 4:8-12)

The minister of the gospel, especially, must expect to feel this strange fact in experience. We are *'always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body'* (2 Cor. 4:10). The Christian minister, more than others, feels the paradox of life in this world. The strange experiences of those who are called to serve Jesus Christ in such a fallen world as this are reflected in terms like these: *'(We live) by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers and yet true, as unknown and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things'* (2 Cor. 6:8-10). Who but a spiritual person could begin to make sense of such a statement?

These experiences are all a part of the paradox of a believer's life in this world. By some he is as much loved as by others he is hated. At some times he is as much filled with joy as at others he is with sadness. *'As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ'* (2 Cor. 1:5).

*'We were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God, which raiseth the dead: who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us.'*

(2 Cor. 1:8-10)

The believer is a mystery to himself much of the time.

The paradox of the believer's life does not end with his outward experiences but it is a daily part of his knowledge of his own sinful heart and of his sinful past. The Christian knows full well that God has forgiven all the sins of his pre-Christian life. But there is a sense in which we must still sorrow to think of our old sins and try to put right the harm which they did to others. There is a sense in which it is a sin to forget our old sins. What else can Peter mean by warning against the example of some who had *'forgotten that they were purged from their old sins'* (2 Pet. 1:9)? It is clear that Paul had not forgotten his old sins. Even at the end of his wonderful ministry he still remembered that he *'was **before** a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious'* (1 Tim. 1:13). Such thoughts, when they are in biblical balance, do not crush us with fear or despair but they refresh our sense of gratitude to God for his free grace.

So too with our present sins. They are a burden to us, and yet, when viewed in the light of Christ's cross, they do not drive us to despair. Indwelling sin humbles the believer but, if seen in the context of the blood of Jesus, it cannot overwhelm him. We take sides against our sins and we approve God's disapproval of them. We approve God's law and applaud it as *'holy, just and good'* (Rom. 7:12) and so we judge our own sins and frown on our own acts of disobedience. We wish, as Christians, that we had never sinned and we wish that we might never sin again; but in the same breath we admit that we are very sinful still.

The difference between the true believer and the hypocrite is seen in the way he views his own sins and the sins of others. To the hypocrite the sins of others are great and his own small. He is confident that the fig-leaves of his own religious performances fully cover over his own minor blemishes. The thought of his heart is, *'God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners ... adulterers'* (Luke 18:11).

Far different is the real believer who knows his own heart. He considers his own sins great and those of others small by comparison. The better the Christian the humbler, his view of himself and the more generous his praise of his brethren. How paradoxical is the language of Paul: *'I am less than the least of all saints'* (Eph. 3:8) and *'the chief of sinners'* (1 Tim. 1:15). Who but a Christian could follow this way of putting himself so low? None of the sons of men of whom we read in the Bible are so great as Paul (we of course exclude Christ, who is the Son of God); yet none speaks so meanly of himself or so disapprovingly of his own sins.

Part of the mystery of Paul's modesty is in the high view he has of God's law and in the serious attitude he has to indwelling sin. We wish all believers had so high a view of the claims of obedience to law upon their lives. Low views of law lead to low views of sin in a believer's life. The next consequence is that we easily live with our sinful selves and do not groan to be delivered from our residual depravity, which is nothing short of residual hatred of God in our souls.

The Christian is not meant to be at ease with his imperfections in this life, but to labour patiently at perfection.

Maurice Roberts

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