

VIII The Pattern of Experience

The annual recurrence of Easter, memorializing the empty tomb and the appearances of the Lord, and the Scripture read at a funeral service constitute for many the limits of their knowledge of its significance. The unfortunate result of this constricted concept is a defective comprehension of the gospel. The resurrection cannot be relegated to the place of an auxiliary miracle corroborating apologetics, nor is it only the denouement of the unfolding plan of salvation. Because it marks the culmination of Christ's revelation and the supreme manifestation of God's power in a hostile world, it is also the essence and pattern of Christian experience.

The incarnate life of Christ is God's design for man's career. The Lord Jesus Christ participated in every normal activity, yet He did not succumb to the temptations that have induced the failure of the human race. His life was characterized by unblemished holiness, which the New Testament presents as a demonstration of divine power to be appropriated rather than as an example to be imitated. His precepts form the basis of spiritual and ethical standards, but the resurrection provides the dynamic by which they may be realized.

The pattern begins with the figure of death. Man apart from God is "dead through your trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Adam, by his initial act of disobedience, severed himself from God, the source of life, and consequently found himself alienated from his Creator, a stranger to His presence and a rebel against His will. When God said to Adam concerning the forbidden fruit, "in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17), He did not mean that Adam would expire within twenty-four hours, for he long survived the expulsion from Eden. God meant rather that he would be cut off from the source of spiritual vitality. The account in Genesis reveals how shame, doubt, misunderstanding, and guilt intervened between man and his Creator. Adam died spiritually because the connection between him and the source of life was broken.

Time alone cannot heal this breach; on the contrary, persistence in sin can only widen it. Time fixes evil habits, ingrains base tendencies, and hardens the conscience against God. Self-reform is impossible, for an imperfect man cannot make himself perfect, nor undo the wrong that has already been done. One might as well speak of reforming a paralytic as of reforming a sinner, because he possesses no spiritual vitality. He is already under condemnation, awaiting the final execution of the sentence. Any amelioration of his condition must originate outside of himself.

Paradoxically, the predicament cannot be solved by man's internal struggles, since he does not possess the moral stamina to cope with evil. Neither can it be alleviated from without, since neither change of location nor ordinary external influence can mold the human will. Were a perfect man to enter the struggle with temptation and were a new life to penetrate spiritual death, victory might be attainable.

The incarnation and resurrection of Christ met both of these conditions. By taking upon Himself the nature of men, Christ entered into their state completely, except that He did not sin (Heb. 4:15). He became voluntarily subject to death that He might know its nature and power through immediate contact. If He were to take the sinner's place, He must share the totality of the sinner's experience.

The death of Christ is the epitome of sin's consequences, the total resultant of the encounter between uninhibited evil and absolute holiness. The shame of legal condemnation, the exposure to ridicule, the humiliation of public disgrace, and the intense physical suffering of the cross combined to inflict upon Jesus the worst that evil could accomplish. He endured every mental and physical agony that any man could bear, and calmly consigned His spirit to God in utter confidence. The manner of His death bespoke victory so convincingly that the pagan centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39).

Even a victorious death is a negative triumph. Although Jesus died voluntarily (John 10:18) and confidently (Luke 23:46), the fact would still remain that He had not differed from all men unless He could defeat death itself. By accepting the sinner's place He proved Himself greater than sin, for He lived a life of holiness, and He did not succumb to the inevitable end of sin, for He rose from the dead. The resurrection thus became the proof of His conquest. It is the symbol of a new kind of life which reacts against the destructive effects of evil and overcomes them. The resurrection is, therefore, not only the historical confirmation of Christ's personal triumph but the demonstration of the essential power of Christian life.

The classic explanation of this principle is the sixth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. By using the death and resurrection of Christ as a norm, Paul created an objective standard which elevated spiritual experience above a purely subjective and experimental method of trial and error. After allowing for all possible differences of individual temperament and of environmental circumstances, there still remains a common rule by which the values of Christian living can be measured. Union with Christ in His death to sin and in His resurrection unto God is the keynote of a post-conversion career.

The first stage of this union is burial with Christ. "We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death" (Rom. 6:4). The rite of baptism denotes a burial. Whether the method used be sprinkling, affusion, or immersion, it is a token of being plunged under the waters of death, by which sin is condemned, punished, and renounced. The convert who accepts baptism confesses himself to be a sinner deserving the sentence which God has pronounced upon his sin, and the cross of Christ becomes for him the dividing line between former rebelliousness and present dedication. He avows that through the death of Christ the world has been crucified to him, and he to the world (Gal. 6:14). Turning from his sins, he relegates them to the grave.

The metaphor of burial does not imply impossibility of further sinning, but finality of decision. The disobedience and alienation of the past must be abandoned and forgotten. Although the memory of former transgressions may have a chastening and humbling effect, the sin itself must be forsaken lest its corruption vitiate the new life into which the believer enters.

Severance from sins avails little, however, unless some definite step be taken in the opposite direction. The Christian life is not merely a negation of evil but the positive assertion of a fresh moral and spiritual vitality. The second element of this symbolism is the new power which springs from union with Christ in resurrection, "that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Emerging from the waters of baptism completes the figure of rising to a new life, without which the Christian would remain spiritually inert. "Newness of life" implies an energy which enables man to accomplish what was previously impossible because of weakness.

Plutarch, an ancient Roman philosopher and writer, once attempted to make a corpse stand on

its feet. Failing to achieve his purpose, he gave up the task in disgust with the comment, "*Deest aliquid intus*"--"Something is missing inside." A cleansed conscience needs more than an ideal to produce a life of holiness; there must be a new power within. The resurrection is the dynamic of Christian ethics. Christ, having risen from the dead, was freed completely from the power of death, for "death no more has dominion over him" (Rom. 6:9). By union with Christ a Christian shares His liberty, not because he becomes instantly flawless, but because the power of Christ possesses and frees him.

A healthy body may harbor germs of many diseases, but they do not endanger it because its vitality is greater than the virulence of the bacteria. Only when the body is weakened by malnutrition or fatigue does illness threaten it. Similarly, Christ's implanted life can counteract the latent tendencies to evil that harass the Christian. The constant impartation of power stabilizes the will and provides resistance to the unremitting barrage of temptations from the outer world. Evil is not abolished, either without the Christian or within him, but the power of God is so applied that he need not succumb to the opposing pressure.

The resurrection sets the pattern for a new environment. Fish cannot live in air and oxen cannot live in water because neither has a constitution adapted to an alien element. A Christian who possesses the life of Christ can exist only in an atmosphere conducive to the support of that life. For this reason the Scripture says, "If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3). When Christ arose, His thoughts and purposes were fixed on the glory that He would share with the Father. In His last prayer with the disciples He petitioned the Father to glorify Him with the glory which they had together before the world was created (John 17:5). Later, when He appeared to Mary Magdalene, He reminded her that He was about to ascend to the Father (20:17). He no longer felt at home on earth and desired to return speedily to the glory.

If a disciple follows his Lord, he also must reach upwards. Paul speaks of "the upward calling . . . in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14), a phrase that is duplicated by the previously quoted passage from Colossians. An eagle that is born to soar in the open sky cannot be content in the confinement of a barnyard. His ambition and his strength are matched with the clouds and the mountain heights. Likewise a Christian who has partaken of the life of Christ should not be satisfied to grovel in sensuality or to live for ephemeral pleasures, however innocent they may seem.

The negative application of this pattern of death, burial, and resurrection is stated explicitly by Paul's word in Colossians. The first stage of death is prescribed for the "members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5). The identification of the deeds with the members of the body implies that sin is not an accidental error but is ingrained into the functioning of personality. Vices are incongruous with Christian character and must be eliminated, for the Holy Spirit cannot operate effectively if such evils are voluntarily permitted to continue.

The negative work of death must be followed by the positive productiveness of resurrection life: "compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, long-suffering, forbearing one another . . . forgiving one another . . . and love." These virtues reflect the qualities which Christ exhibited on earth and are the beneficial effects which He imparts to the regenerate individual.

The model for Christians is not an abstract code of law or an impossible ideal of goodness, but Christ, who has proved His power to maintain a holy life under the most adverse conditions that a human being can endure. The attainment of this ideal depends upon the measure of control that He exercises upon the believer; the key is not imitation, it is regulation. Paul expressed this truth in his classic sentence, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). Commitment to a Saviour whose power is available in present emergencies insures the development of Christian character.

The correspondence of the believer's experience to Christ's resurrection is susceptible of more extensive comparison. God "made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:5,6). In these mystical words the language of Ephesians sets a new spiritual perspective. Life seems bewildering and aimless to those who are embroiled in its conflicts because they cannot visualize any single purpose in the multitude of confused events. By viewing the process from the divine standpoint, "the right hand of God," one can attain some comprehension of God's total design. His objective for the world is centered in Christ, through whom and for whom it was created (Col. 1:16), and the process of its redemption and restoration has been epitomized in His personal conquest of destruction and decay. Sharing with Christ the seat "in the heavenlies" one can comprehend better his own place in God's total economy, for he realizes that his salvation comprises not only his own deliverance from sins and fears but also the creation of a new world of which he becomes a part.

This enlarged perspective is amply illustrated by the Epistle to the Ephesians, which stresses the unity of the church. Paul teaches that Jew and Gentile are drawn together into one body through Christ, who has become "our peace" (Eph. 2:14). God, having raised Him from the dead, "gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (1:22-23). United by their individual dependence on the one invisible Head, the members of the church of Christ are indissolubly joined together in devotion to His person and consecration to His will. Unitedly they share the spiritual resources of the Holy Spirit whom He has sent and the wisdom which He exercises in directing and governing them.

Being thus elevated with Him above the artificial boundaries of time, space, and race, they become part of a universal fellowship in which there is no room for provincialism. The individual Christian realizes that he participates in a great plan which God has been perfecting through the ages. Understanding this fact broadens his vision and intensifies his confidence that his work will not end in futility, however constricted and transitory it may seem.

Such a perspective promotes both faith and courage. The workman engaged in erecting a building can often see only the monotony and the petty annoyances of his task, the perspiration and dirt on his body, and the apparent interference from other workmen. The architect who holds the blueprints can see the coordination of the work, and can watch the progress as a whole. He knows the irritating hindrances that occur, and he waits patiently for them to correct themselves. Because the work is proceeding according to schedule, he has courage to believe that it will reach a satisfactory culmination. If the workman could share the architect's knowledge, he would pursue his labor enthusiastically, knowing that it was part of a larger and more enduring project.

The culmination of the present pattern will be the final resurrection of the body. The progress of spiritual growth is "from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:18). The Holy Spirit is the agent by whom the life of Christ is applied to the believer, so that he grows into the likeness of the Saviour and is gradually prepared to enter the "house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens" (5:1). The power which is now realized inwardly and mystically will finally be manifested outwardly and physically when God's program is completed.

The perfection of this purpose is nowhere described in detail. Numerous phrases, however, intimate its nature. Christ is the prototype, for John says, "we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is" (I John 3:2). "As he is" refers to His glorified presence, and therefore believers will share the likeness of His present state. By contemplating indirectly His glory "as in a mirror" (II Cor. 3:18), they progress toward the day when the gradual process will culminate in sudden realization. "This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (I Cor. 15:53). Freed from the oppressive hindrances of sin's environment and effects, they will enter into "the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Paul likens this crisis to "adoption," by which a child is publicly acknowledged as a mature member of the family and is declared to have attained his majority (Rom. 8:23). He will then be capable of enjoying the total heritage that God has prepared for him and will realize fully his eternal destiny.