

Concerning the Experience of Christ as Life

- 1 A flowing river and a tree,
Eden's outstanding features are,
Man to supply with food and drink
That he may live fore'er.

God is in Christ to be my supply,
God as the Spirit nourisheth me;
If upon Christ in spirit I feed,
Filled with His life I'll be.
- 2 The tree the glorious Christ does show,
As living food to man supplied,
That he God's riches may enjoy,
Thus to be satisfied.
- 3 The river does the Spirit show,
Coming man's spirit to supply,
That with God's riches he be filled,
Holy to be thereby.
- 4 The Christ of glory is my life,
He as the Spirit lives in mine,
That I with God be fully blent
And in His image shine.
- 5 I would exalt this glorious Christ,
Ever the Spirit I'd obey,
Making His glory fully known,
Filled with His grace for aye. (*Hymns*, #509)

The outstanding features in the garden of Eden were, according to the above hymn, "a flowing river and a tree." We may have considered other things more remarkable: maybe the pristine beauty of the garden environs, or perhaps the new couple exploring all the wonders of God's creation, or their enjoyment of "the sound (or voice) of Jehovah God walking about in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8). But this hymn, written by Witness Lee, singles out "a flowing river and a tree" as the exceptionally significant items in the garden. It should arrest our attention and cause us to ponder why the hymn writer chose these two factors as the most noteworthy. To comprehend the depths of this hymn, we need to reflect on what

the Bible is and what it conveys to its believers. Because the Bible does not contain extraneous or inconsequential information, the description of the garden must communicate a particular revelation, a revelation which is expressed in the river and the tree.

The Bible is the unique book in the world which, under the direct inspiration of God, unveils who God is, why He established the created universe, why He made man, and how we can know and be related to Him. The Bible is *God's revelation of Himself to us*. Beginning in Genesis God unveils Himself page by page and book by book in a rich multiplicity of facets, and what He reveals often does not fit the religious expectations and concepts of men. If we read carefully, we will see that He is not seeking good behavior from His creatures; rather, His intention is that He Himself would be joined with humanity in a life union to make them His expression.

In this light we should seek to understand the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. At the end of this chapter God made humanity in His own image and according to His own likeness. Humanity, designed to reflect and represent the Creator, is at the center of God's creation. All other aspects of creation simply form the tapestry behind the central figures. The second chapter presents a more detailed explanation of how God formed man and the setting into which He placed him.

Jehovah God formed man with the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. And Jehovah God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground Jehovah God caused to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, as well as the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And a river went forth from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divided and became four branches. (7-10)

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When Jehovah God placed man in the garden, He gave him a blessing and a warning, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may eat freely, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of it you shall not eat; for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (vv. 16-17).

Although the Bible identifies two trees in the garden—one unto life and the other unto death—this hymn refers only to the tree of life; it does not mention the second tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thus, the hymn focuses on the positive aspects of the garden. From this simple beginning we are led by the writer into the meaning of these two features which represent God as our unique provision: “Man to supply with food and drink that he may live fore’er.”

In the chorus, we are ushered into the deeper significance of these provisions—they are not primarily physical but spiritual in nature: “God is in Christ to be my supply, God as the Spirit nourisheth me.” The tree represents Christ as the content of our supply, and the flowing river represents the Spirit as the flowing out of this supply. The deeper, spiritual reality of Christ and the Spirit are represented by these physical symbols. Physical life, as we know, understand, and experience it, requires an ongoing supply which is metabolically transmitted into our being through food and drink. The food we eat and the water we drink are essential elements which we must regularly receive into our physical bodies for our existence and health. Without this continual supply we would cease to exist in the physical aspect. Similarly, in our human spirit, we must be supplied daily, even moment by moment, with the elements of God’s life. We are not and we can never be self-contained and self-sufficient. We must ever remain in absolute dependence on the divine supply for our spiritual constitution and nourishment. This is the significance of the tree and the river in the garden.

The implication of our essential needs—described in the Bible’s initial portrayal of the tree of life and the river of water of life—is developed in the New Testament. In particular, we can see this by comparing the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation with Genesis 1 and 2.

To grasp the meaning of the tree of life in Eden, we are greatly helped by the Lord’s speaking in John 6:53-56. There, at a critical juncture in His sojourn on the earth, the Lord Jesus uttered a most striking—even shocking—declaration:

Jesus therefore said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I

will raise him up in the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him.

The disciples were in consternation that day, and many of them ceased to follow Him any longer (v. 66). What could it possibly mean to say that without eating His flesh we do not have life in us? How could eating the flesh of Jesus result in receiving eternal life? The Lord explained, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (v. 63), but it all seemed too ethereal, too difficult, to apply to their actual living. Still, His close disciples realized they had no other place to go because He alone had the words of eternal life.

On the eve of His crucifixion, the Lord unveiled the intrinsic meaning of receiving Him as life when He spoke of the experience of mutually abiding in and with Him. His words imply an intrinsic life union.

Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing...If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. (John 15:4-5, 7)

The book of the Revelation reaches its climax concerning the consummation of the economy of God with a declaration that in the New Jerusalem, John saw the river and the tree: “And he showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street. And on this side and on that side of the river was the tree of life” (22:1-2). From these portions of Scripture, we can see that there is something particular in the heart of God concerning the river and the tree first introduced in Eden.

If by the Lord’s mercy we are able to see clearly His divine economy, we will gradually apprehend that the deep significance of these two sources of divine sustenance and nutrition is that God intends to join Himself to the humanity He created in His own image and likeness. And we can see further that God’s union with humanity is not merely a relationship of affection, purpose, respect, worship, or even in some deeper sense of spiritual consciousness. God’s objective, His goal, in His coming to His creation is to be mingled with humanity to the ultimate degree that He supplies and constitutes humanity so that humanity might become a living expression of Himself!

To carry out this purpose, God first became a man, the man Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5-8). But even more astonishing

is God's aspiration that this God-man, Christ Jesus, would eventually become the life-giving Spirit and mingle Himself with millions of His believers to produce His many brothers as His reproduction and increase to become the church, His fullness (1 Cor. 15:45; Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:22-23). This dynamic salvation implied by the tree in the garden is comprehended by the Lord's presentation of Himself as food to the disciples in John 6. He intends to be life and everything to His believers. Thus, the chorus of the hymn concludes, "If upon Christ in spirit I feed, filled with His life I'll be." Christ becomes the divine element dispensed into His believers to be their life and their living (cf. John 6:57-58).

Stanza 2 points out, "The tree the glorious Christ does show, as living food to man supplied, that he God's riches may enjoy, thus to be satisfied." The life of God was first manifested bodily in the person of Jesus Christ. Now God's aim is to share that life with all His believers not in the shallow way of merely causing them to exist for eternity but in the profound way of dispensing the very life of God into their being to produce a metabolic change in their life and living. Christ becomes food to them and thus imparts all His riches into them in the way of life.

What then is the intrinsic essence represented by the flowing river? Stanza 3 explains: "The river does the Spirit show, coming man's spirit to supply, that with God's riches he be filled, holy to be thereby." In John's Gospel there is also the proclaiming of the fountain of water that gushes up and of the flowing streams of living water (4:14; 7:37-38). If we drink this water, it will well up within us into eternal life, and it will become streams of living water flowing out from us. The water here pertains to the Spirit whom the believers all receive through faith in Jesus Christ. Hence, the Lord is not only the living food to be our constituting supply; He also brings us the living water that refreshes and renews us day by day. He constitutes us with Himself as our metabolic supply, and He refreshes and washes us as the sanctifying Spirit.

Accordingly, stanza 4 exults: "The Christ of glory is my life, He as the Spirit lives in mine, that I with God be fully blent and in His image shine." The Spirit, as the flowing river of water of life, washes us, refreshes us, and supplies us with the riches of God in His sanctifying grace—adding the nature of God to our new person, making us holy (cf. Eph. 1:4-5; 2 Pet. 1:3-4; 2 Thes. 2:13). We shine in

the full image of the glorious Christ who is now indwelling us to be our life and our all in all until we become full-grown in Him (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 1:27-28).

The ultimate stanza concludes with the way in which a recipient of this unimaginable grace of God in Christ should live—with uncomplicated faith and unwavering obedience: "I would exalt this glorious Christ, ever the Spirit I'd obey, making His glory fully known, filled with His grace for aye." One who has become a partaker of this grace does not need to struggle or strive for personal gain or public success. His only goal is to exalt the Christ who is now the indwelling Spirit in his spirit. His only means is to obey the promptings of the Spirit within and magnify Christ in his daily living. This is similar to the testimony of the apostle Paul who, knowing that his imprisonment in a Roman jail would turn out to his salvation through the petition of the believers and the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, had the earnest expectation and hope that in nothing would he be put to shame, but that with all boldness, as always, Christ would be magnified in his body, whether through life or through death (Phil. 1:19-20). This is the ultimate result of eating the tree of life and enjoying the flowing river of water of life in our being: We are full of faith and grace and live a life that, in absolute oneness with Him, glorifies and exalts Him.

Concerning the Experience of Christ Versus All Things

After we have seen the river and the tree, we may still wonder, "What about the second tree in the garden?" What is the significance and issue of partaking of that tree? We know from the experience of Adam and Eve that the result of partaking of the tree of knowledge was that the judgment of God came not only upon them but upon all humankind—all have sinned and have come short of God's glory; therefore, death has passed to all humanity (Rom. 5:17-19, 21; 3:23; 6:23).

The result of the first man's taking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge was death. Today when we eat of that "tree," the result is the same—spiritual death. This "death" is described in Ephesians 4:18 concerning the Gentiles who, walking in the vanity of their mind, are "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance which is in them, because of the hardness of their heart." Paul then says

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of God into their being*

that the believers did “not so learn Christ” (v. 20), indicating that as we enjoy Christ as our life we are saved from the vanity of our mind and kept from becoming alienated from the life of God.

Regrettably, as those who have experienced the saving and redeeming grace of the Lord Jesus and have received the gift of eternal life through faith in Him, we may in our daily experience partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil by actively pursuing substitutes and replacements for Christ. We need to develop an absolute trust in Christ as our unique life supply and an unqualified rejection of all other sources of living and service. Christ must be our exclusive source and our unique stream.

The following hymn warns concerning the many substitutes and replacements for Christ that we may encounter in our daily life and living; it repeatedly reminds us of the inescapable fact that in God’s economy Christ is versus all other things.

- 1 Not the law of letters,
But the Christ of life
God desires to give us,
Saving us from strife;
It is not some doctrine,
But ’tis Christ Himself
Who alone releases
From our sinful self.
- 2 Any kind of teaching,
Any kind of form,
Cannot quicken spirits
Or our souls transform;
It is Christ as Spirit
Gives us life divine,
Thus thru us to live the
Life of God’s design.
- 3 Not philosophy nor
Any element
Can to Christ conform us
As His complement;
But ’tis Christ Himself who
All our nature takes
And in resurrection
Us His members makes.
- 4 Not religion, even
Christianity,
Can fulfill God’s purpose
Or economy;
But ’tis Christ within us
As our all in all
Satisfies God’s wishes,
And His plan withal.

- 5 All the gifts we’re given
By the Lord in grace,
All the different functions
Cannot Christ replace.
Only Christ Himself must
Be our all in all!
Only Christ Himself in
All things, great or small! (*Hymns*, #541)

This helpful hymn by Witness Lee merits our careful consideration and prayerful musing in order that we may become alert to the many alternatives to living by Christ alone. These alternatives in actuality are the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The most common condition that keeps humanity from the rich experience of knowing and loving God is the vain effort to please God by means of philosophy, religion, good works, self-achievement, gifts, etc. In our fallen nature, there is a lack of clarity and simplicity concerning God and His ways. Instead, there is ambiguity, obfuscation, and self-deception. It is beneficial for us to remember the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “The heart is deceitful above all things, / And it is incurable; / Who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). We have received the life of God through faith in Christ, but we may in fact be “feeding” on the deceitful fruit of the tree of knowledge in our daily life.

The above hymn tells us of many “nots” of which we must beware: *not* the law of letters, *not* some doctrine, *not* any kind of teaching, and *not* any kind of form can save us, release us, transform us, or give us divine life. Neither can philosophy nor any element conform us to Christ or constitute us to be His members. All of these alternatives are versus Christ as our only source of the divine life.

Elsewhere, Witness Lee explains that believers must not allow any substitute to become a replacement for Christ as the motivating and empowering factor in our living and walk:

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him.” We are not to live in the self, or in religion, or in the law. We are in Christ, and we are to walk in Him. We must not let the traditions of men take us away from Him. Let religion go. Let the law go. Let culture go. Stay in Christ. He is above culture, philosophy, and religion. Live Him!

Who is this One? He is the all-inclusive life-giving Spirit. Do not think of Him as far off on the throne above. As the Spirit He mingles with your spirit, making you one with Him. Stay in the Spirit. Let the Spirit be in control. When you are in spirit, you live Christ. Let Him be in charge, rather than your culture.

Christ is the Spirit, giving life. Outside of Him there are

countless things we take as substitutes. All such substitutes are other than He. Even the study of the Bible is not Christ. Only the Spirit is Christ. We must be in that Spirit, mingled with Him. To live Christ is to live in the Spirit. Care only for this one matter: be in spirit, live in spirit, walk in spirit, pray in spirit, and fellowship in spirit. Let other things go. Simply live Christ. (*Life* 199-200)

Stanza 4 highlights what is perhaps the greatest problem among seeking Christians—our genuine faith may be transmuted into religion: “Not religion, even Christianity, can fulfill God’s purpose or economy; but ’tis Christ within us as our all in all satisfies God’s wishes, and His plan withal.”

There is a critical need to know and realize that the believers have been ushered into a “life union” with the living Christ. On the one hand, we are branches in the vine (John 15:1-7), and on the other, we are the members of His Body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). In this life union, we are not merely believers in Christ seeking to live an exemplary life in order to bear His testimony. Such a living is actually our vain attempt to be a “good Christian.”

Christianity, as a religion, will frustrate the operation of the living God within us. The law of letters, our doctrines, teachings, and forms are all obstructions to the organic operation of the living Christ as the Spirit within us. The apostle Paul declared that he had counted all things as loss in order to gain Christ (Phil. 3:7-8). Similarly, we should reject every kind of activity, goal, objective, and achievement and involve ourselves only with the all-inclusive provision in God’s economy—the living Christ as the indwelling life-giving Spirit in our spirit moving, spreading, and carrying out His purpose through us. In this way we will follow the Lord’s imperative declaration to His disciples: “He who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me” (John 6:57). He is added to us through our receiving of Him and by our being joined to Him.

We have been joined to the Lord to be one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17). We are partakers with Him in the divine sonship to which we were predestinated before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-5). This sonship became an accomplished fact through the work of Christ in His incarnation, human living, all-inclusive death, and all-conquering resurrection. When we believed into Him

we were given authority to become the children of God, because the divine life was actually imparted into us—we were born of God (John 1:12-13; 3:5-6).

Now day by day, we must receive this wonderful person, our Lord Jesus Christ, to strengthen and supply us in our life-union with Him that we may grow into maturity—full-grown sons (Rom. 8:14-23; Col. 1:28). We must learn to eat Him by our prayerful reading of His Word, contacting Him in and with the Scriptures. As we eat and drink Him, our life union becomes stronger and more prevailing to such a degree that we become Him and He becomes us. It is a wonderful process of eating the fruit of the tree of life and drinking the living waters of the river. Because Paul was such a person, he was able to say without exaggeration and without boasting, “To me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). Therefore, He had a particular view when he instructed the believers in Philippi to work out their own salvation—“For it is God who operates in you [*energizes in you*] both the willing and the working for His good pleasure” (2:13). It is not religious worship or Christian ethics that can satisfy God. It is only Christ Himself as the operating God living Himself out through us that can make God happy and harmonize us with His eternal goal.

The cry of the apostle “no longer I...but it is Christ” (Gal. 2:20) is echoed in the final stanza; his deep sensation and fervent determination was that only Christ would be the One living in and through him. Similarly, the final four lines of the hymn avow: “Only Christ Himself must be our all in all! Only Christ Himself in all things, great or small!”

God has no delight in the religious forms of worship. What He wants are genuine sons—those who simply come to receive Him as their life that He may be their wisdom, power, understanding, and living. He wants those who by faith enter into oneness with Him in His death and walk in the newness of His resurrection life. In this life union, they grow together with Him in the likeness of His death and mature with Him in the likeness of His resurrection (Rom. 6:4-5). The way of God goes far

beyond all human religion, ethics, culture, or morality. God’s unique way is only Christ Himself as our all in all! Only Christ in all things, great and small!

by Gary Kaiser

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