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Lenten Meditation: The Christian - His Life, n.d.

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THE CHRISTIAN - HIS LIFE

Text: What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

In all the long and bitter story of man, in all the numberless questions which he has asked of life, of the Universe, and of God, one stands out above all others. Man has always asked it. Spoken by the lips of philosophers and poets, screamed by the living and mumbled by the dying, it has become the one great dominating question of all time: "What is life?" And as often as men have asked it, so often they have tried to answer it. In Luther's day, over in France, Rabelais died in a fit of laughter calling to his friends: "Draw the curtain, the farce is played out." Dryden said that life is a cheat, and the immortal Shakespeare had nothing more to say than:

"Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his brief hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. The tale of an idiot
Full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing."

And this mood is still the dominating mood of our own day. Since 1918 the number of men and women who have taken life into their own hands and thrown it away has more than doubled. All around us there is today a haunting sense of
futility, a shattering bewilderment, a restless asking whether the game is worth the candle. Thousands do not want to live, because life is not worth living. In his "New Geography" Hendeth Von Loon says that the whole of humanity could be packed into a box a half-mile high, a half-mile wide, and a half-mile long. He then adds that if we balanced the box neatly on the edge of the Grand Canyon and gave it a gentle push, there would be a sudden splash followed by silence and oblivion. "The human sardines in their great coffin would soon be forgotten. A mound densely covered by trees and grasses would perhaps indicate where they lie buried. And that would be all."

Let us be honest with ourselves! If that is all that life and time and man signify, then there is no sense in living. Then the restless tramping of the marching feet of men is an aimless journey from nowhere to nowhere, and we can do what we please, think what we please, and live and die like beasts of the field for whom there is no light, and no purpose and no hope. No, in the name of God, life is more than that. Long ago heaven came down to earth and told men that life was infinitely more precious and noble than that. Into the incredible shame and weariness of Life our Lord Christ came and placed upon the life and the soul of man the stamp of a new price the great eternal value bought and paid for by pain and suffering and death. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Here was a new evaluation of the life and soul of man — all the world on one
side of the balance and his lonely, weary, sinburdened soul on
the other — and the eyes of God were upon his soul. Behind
these words were the long whisperings of the ages "I have loved
thee with an everlasting love; I have called thee by thy name;
I gave Egypt for thy ransom; thou art mine." Above these words
was this own tender and compelling love that would not let us go
the love that entered into our loneliness, stooped under our
burdens, and finally in the power and grandeur of the yearning
heart of God stretched out its arms on a cross to redeem us
from sin — to give us again a true vision of life — life full,
rich, and brave and free — life as God intended it to be.

"What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world
and lose his own soul?" I fully realize the tremendous diffi-
culty of saying these things to you today in our modern world.
It is hard for us to understand them. The world is so much
with us that this quiet decisive question is almost lost in the
roar of the business of living. In one of our recent plays the
author places a 20th century man into the first century and
shows us what happens. He describes the influence of our Lord
Christ on a wealthy family in Jerusalem. One by one the members
of the family feel the compelling impact of the Savior of men.
Only the head of the house, a young business man, remains un-
touched. He sees his family broken up, he feels Jerusalem
trembling, but he remains unmoved. Finally, on the Sunday after
the Friday of Agony, his old father is standing at the window
looking up at the Mount of Olives watching the family go away.
Suddenly he cries out. He has seen another figure with them —
the figure of the Nazarene — not dead, but alive. He tells his
son, but the son is busy with his accounts. He does not deny.
He does not oppose. He simply does not care. The whole business
means nothing to him, nothing to his conscience, nothing to
his heart. He does not know that in a few years that figure
climbing the Mount of Olives will come back again in the noise
and confusion of war and before His crowned head and uplifted
arm Jerusalem will crumble into dust and ashes. He does not
know that his one golden moment near Christ has come and gone
forever. He does not know! He is busy with his accounts! Turn
the years forward and the miles westward and you will find that
man again in every business in the world, in a hundred offices
in Fort Wayne, in every church in Christendom. He has become
the bitter sorrow of God and the crying problem of the Church!
So it is whom we must reach today as God gives us strength
and time — reach with the words which pierce his soul and stab
his heart: "What shall it profit you if you gain the whole
world and lose your own soul?"

When all is said and done, the only answer to this in-
difference in the hearts of men lies in the Cross of Christ. If
today you are not sure of the importance of your life, if you
doubt the value of your soul, may I ask you to look for a moment
at the Cross? There is the final proof of how much we mean
to God. The Cross was the gift of all that God had. It was
the seal of all He has ever said about the eternal value of the
human soul. "What shall it profit a man" — by all His agony
and bloody sweat he means it — by His cross and passion, by His lonely death and burial. He means it. The Cross is the last word of God to the human soul, pursuing it, seeking it, calling it, even into the darkness of death. I have heard of a father whaling the streets of a great city at night calling for a lost child. "If she hears my voice she will come home." "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." It's the same language. Calvary and the Cross are God's way of setting down the price of the human soul so that nobody need ever again misunderstand. For three years He had lived and talked with men. He had broken their bread and shared their sorrows, He had told them of the writing of God. And on that First Good Friday a crowd poured out of the Damascus gate — there were the heavy strokes of a hammer — and the cross dropped into the ground. Now God could say no more. All the blood from His head and His hands — all the tears in His eyes and the fever on His lips — all the agony of His soul and the pain of His heart — cried aloud so that no man ever born into the world could fail to hear: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Men may turn away from that Cross, they may try to forget that lonely figure against a darkened sky, they may still believe that the world is worth something to them, but they can never again quite forget that their souls burdened and sick with sin brought the King of kings and the Lord of lords to a Cross.

And now — we turn from yesterday to today. It is an old truth but ever new: That accomplished redemption, that last great demonstration of the infinite love of God accepted in faith by the believing heart alone makes life worth living.
Pride will not do it. Money will not do it. It is a strange paradox of God that before life can reach its fullest and highest value, before we can really live, we must free the needs of Him - the need of His power - the need of His redeeming presence. There is an old legend of a boy in the first century who said to his father:

"You must have been living in Capernaum when Jesus was there. What was He like?" I do not know my son. I never met Him. I had no need to seek Him out." Next door another lad, "Father, did you know Jesus?" "Yes, I knew Him very well." "How did you come to know Him so well?" "My son, I was a sower." So God lets us see ourselves as we are, with all our sin and all our shame, until nothing but a Savior will do. And then He enters Life and we, our old selves crucified with Him, begin to see the value of life. How we can know what it means to stand in the long line of those who have come down through the centuries bearing in their hands the Cross of Christ - the symbol of a past that is dead and a future that lies forever in the nail-torn hands of the Everlasting Rebuilder of the souls of men.

"What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Shall we make it personal for a moment? Few of us are entirely and completely satisfied with our lives. There are the old sins and the old troubles - there are weaknesses and defeats - there are the ghosts of yesterday's mistakes which haunt us as we face tomorrow. Perhaps we have tried to compromise.
Perhaps we have made the great perennial mistake made by uncounted thousands of trying to gain the world and keep our souls. Also we must hear his warning voice again and again. Also we must know that there eternal hope and everlasting glory lies in seeing Life as He saw it from the altar of the Cross. Only then will our own lives, often so weak and helpless, so torn and broken by sin, be transformed by the hand of His power into preludes of eternity and the everlasting values of God. We may not have gained the whole world — but with Him it is well lost.