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LIFE AND ITS VALUE IN THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Life is precious to all of us. We can notice in this world various levels of life, and in each level a natural tendency among all the living beings to preserve life. If we look into the attitude of human beings towards life from the stone-age upto now, we may come across a wide variety of customs and beliefs. Even the well known world-religions do not have a unified view on this matter. The christian sacred writings, however, contain a view of life which is perhaps the most valuable contribution of the past humanity to the modern world. We shall now explore this christian view of life shining out of the pages of the Bible.

1. Life as Precious Gift of God

The Bible recognizes life as a precious gift of God. In the book of Genesis it is said that God created all living beings (Gen 1.20ff), and that human beings are created in a special way in God's own image and likeness in order to become the crown of creation (Gen 1.26ff). It is by the breath of God that man becomes a living being (Gen 2.7.). When the breath ceases, man dies. Hence man is not the author of his life, which is a free and precious gift of God. That is why man is ready to give up everything in order to preserve his life (Job 2.4). The preacher of wisdom says: "Be not wicked overmuch, neither be a fool; why should you die before your time?" (Eccl 7.17). Qoheleth considers life as something to be preserved and enjoyed: "For if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all... Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth..." (Eccl 11.8-9). The Psalmist wanted to be always on the land of the living: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!" (Ps 27.13). In the Old Testament, to live a long life was considered as the blessing of

God, which everyone must aspire for (Gen 25.8; 35.29; Job 42. 17). Life is itself the basic good without which no other good can be enjoyed, "for, a living dog is better than a dead lion" (Eccl 9.4).

God gave human beings participation in His act of creation in so far as they have to transmit the precious life to their posterity (Gen 1.28). So the parents vehemently desired to have children. Even Abraham in his old age complained to God saying: "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir" (Gen 15.3). The Psalmist has seen the children as source of great joy for their parents: "Lo, sons are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward" (Ps 127.3); "The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children!" (Ps 128.5-6). Here life and happiness is viewed as something fully earth-bound, and children as a sort of extension of one's own life.

2. Life is to be Enjoyed in Full Measure

At the time of king Hezekiah, when an Assyrian envoy promised life to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, he promised also the good things of life: "...then everyone of you will eat of his own vine, and every one of his own fig tree, and every one will drink the water of his own cistern; until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live, and not die" (2 K 18. 31-32). God promised to his people that they would live possessing the land (Dt 4.1; 16.20); for the land is the land of the living, where life can be fully experienced. So Moses instructed his people: "These are the statutes and ordinances which you shall be careful to do in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live upon the earth" (Dt 12.1). The Psalmist supposes that man desires life and length of days to enjoy in full measure the good of life (Ps 34.12). Qoheleth also expresses this idea when he says: "Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything" (Eccl 10.19). Thus for ancient Israel,

life is the vigor and power of the body and its functions, its capacity for pleasure, which is the fullness of life.¹

3. Death Destroys Life

The Old Testament views death as the total destruction of life. About the dead it is said: "They are dead, they will not live; they are shades, they will not arise; to that end thou hast visited them with destruction and wiped out all remembrance of them" (Is 26. 14). In his sickness king Hezekiah prayed to God for life saying: "For Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness. The living, the living, he thanks thee as I do this day" (Is 38.18-19).

Sheol is, according to the belief of the OT people, the resting place of the dead. It is hades, the name of the underworld in Greek mythology. The grave is considered as the entrance to Sheol. The Psalmist prayed against his enemies: "Let death come upon them; let them go down to Sheol alive; let them go away in terror into their graves" (Ps 55.15). No human being is capable of saving himself or herself from the power of Sheol: "What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?" (Ps 89.48). Often Sheol is equated with the grave. It is a pit, a place of darkness, worms, and dust (Job 17. 13-16). Those who are in Sheol are in a state of utter inactivity, which is the opposite of life. They cannot thank and praise God (Is 38.18). The Psalmist says to God: "For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise?" (Ps 6.5). Sheol is thus a dark region of forgetfulness and inactivity (Ps 88. 5-13). Sickness and other dangers are threats to life, and as such they are a form of Sheol and death active in the present world. Only God can save man from Sheol.²

4. Life is Fragile

Life in human beings as well as in all other living creatures is by nature fragile. It is prone to death. The breath found in

1. Cf. John L. Mckenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London, 1972, p. 507

2. Cf. 1 S 2.5; Pss 16.10; 30.3; 49.15; 86.13; 116.3ff; Jon 2.6

the living beings is a gift of God (Is 42.5). But when God takes away that breath, they die (Ps 104. 29). Job acknowledges the brevity of human life as he says: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower, and withers; he flees like a shadow, and continues not" (Job 14.1-2). The Psalmist has also a realistic view of life as he says: "For all our days pass away under thy wrath, our years come to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" (Ps 90.9-10).

5. Life is Sacred

Bible considers life as something sacred. The reason behind is mainly the fact that it is created by God. Human life is all the more sacred, since God has created human beings in a very special way. The creation account shows that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.³ The whole life of man is something that is directly coming from God: "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen 2.7). Because of this sacred character of human life, God has offered to it his special protection by his law: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9.6). In the Decalogue God commands: "You shall not kill" (Ex 20. 13). God promises to protect the life of even a Cain who realized the gravity of his sin: "Then the Lord said to him, Not so! If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him" (Gen 4.15).

6. A Glimpse of a Life Beyond Death

The idea of an after-life found its clear expression only in the latest books of the OT, which are of the exilic and postexilic period. Through the prophet Ezekiel God announced: "As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ez 33.11). In Ezekiel we can see the

3. Cf. Gen 1.26-27

idea of a restoration of life by way of resurrection of the body, for God says: "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land" (Ez 37.13-14). During the religious persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes, a Jewish mother encouraged her seven sons to receive martyrdom saying: "Therefore the creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws" (2 Macc 7.23). In the book of Daniel there is a prophetic look into the end-time when the dead will rise: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever" (Dn 12.2-3). In the book of Wisdom there is the firm belief that the dead are living in God: "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died..... but they are at peace" (Wis 3.1-3). "The righteous live for ever, and their reward is with the Lord; the Most High take care of them" (Wis 5.15).

The men of God in the OT have slowly realized that their expectation of long life and prosperity was in contradicton with their life experience on this earth. So they began to view life from a spiritual point of view, according to which the true life emerges from fellowship with God. So the Psalmist sang: "Thy steadfast love is better than life" (Ps 63.3); "Thou doest show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Ps 16.11); "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps 23.1); "With thee is the fountain of life" (Ps 36.9). Thus in the later books of the OT, life is viewed metaphorically in terms of spirituality and life-mysticism.⁴ The Psalmist had the firm hope of an everlasting life with God when he sang: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever" (Ps 73. 26).

4. Cf. G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, 1966, pp. 258f.

The Deuteronomistic theologians have perceived the relationship between life and observing the law of God. "Man does not live by bread alone, but.....by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of Yahweh" (Dt. 8.3). Obeying God's word "is not trifle, but it is your life" (Dt 32.47).

The prophets announced to the people God's word appealing to obey His laws in order that they could live: "Seek me and live"; "Seek good and not evil, that you may live" (Am 5.4,14). Ezekiel announced that the righteous shall live while the wicked will die.⁵

In the Wisdom writings, just as in Jr 21.8, two opposite ways leading to life and death are presented. If human beings accept Wisdom as their guide they will be on the way leading to life, but if not they are along the pathway to death.⁶

7. Life is Eternal

The New Testament writings of the Bible contain the most developed thought on human life. This developed thought, however, is based on that which is found in the OT, late Jewish and Greek writings.

The Synoptic Gospels retain the OT consideration of life as a priceless possession: Jesus asks: "What can a man give in return for his life?" (Mk 8.37). True life depends on how a person, lives according to God's word.⁷ To live away from God is described in the parable of the prodigal son as being dead.⁸ Peter confesses Jesus as the Son of the living God.⁹ Interpreting God's word: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob", Jesus established that "he is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Mt 22.32), and thereby he showed that the dead Patriarchs are in fact living now. This eternal life consists in being with the eternally living God. To the disciples who asked Jesus of their reward for leaving off everything and following him,

5. Cf. Ez 3,18ff; 14.20; 18.4,9,13,17,20ff; 33.11; 37.5.

6. Cf. Pr 2.18f; 3.2,18; 4.4,10,22; 5.6; 6.23; 8.35; 9.11,18.

7. Cf. Mt 4.4

8. Cf. Lk 15.24,32.

9. Cf. Mt 16.16

he replied: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time.....and in the age to come eternal life" (Mk 10.29-30). Hence the NT is pointing to a life after the present life on earth. This after-life is termed as "eternal life". It was about attaining this life that a young man was anxious when he came and asked Jesus: "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" (Mt 19.16). At the last judgement the righteous will go to "eternal life" (Mt 25.46). Jesus Christ brought to us "life and immortality" (2 Tim 1.10).

This "eternal life" is attained by man not by reason of the immortality of the soul as it is presented in the Greek dichotomic thinking, but as a pure gift from God who raises the dead.¹⁰ It is the very life of God, true and real. Man can attain this life only by dissociating himself from sin: "If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter limp than with two feet to be thrown into hell" (Mk 9.45). The NT does not devalue the present life of man. It is the present relationship with God and with one's fellow-human beings that determines the "eternal life" to come. The last judgement will be based on works of charity which are expressions of love for God: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25.40). Those who disobeyed God's law of love "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25.46).

6. Life is the Very Life of God

The Johannine writings in the NT have gone deeper into the exploration of the nature of life. When John speaks of "eternal life", he concentrates more on its quality than on its duration aspect. C.H. Dodd says: "It is more philosophical to deny an ending to that which is in its nature eternal, than to affirm perpetuity in time of that which is strictly timeless" (C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 150). This life is the same as the life by which God himself lives, and

10. Cf. Mt 22.31f; Mk 12.26f; Lk 20.36f.

which the Son of God possesses from the Father. For Jesus says: "As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (Jn 5.26). Referring to the sacrament of Eucharist Jesus says: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me" (Jn 6.57).

John presents the divine word as eternally living with God even before creation and his incarnation. "In him was life" (Jn 1.4). He possesses this life with a special orientation to share it with human beings: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" (1 Jn 4.9). And Jesus said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10.10).

Faith is the means to attain this life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3.16). "He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life" (1 Jn 5.12). Concluding the Gospel John writes: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (Jn 20.31).

Love of brethren is the criterion and sign of this true life: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 Jn 3.14). Jesus said: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13.35). Only by becoming his disciples and abiding in him human beings can share the divine life which is the true life: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers....." (Jn 15.5-6). One can abide in the incarnate Son of God only by doing his commandment of brotherly love.¹¹

The real source of this life manifested in love is the Holy Spirit. So Jesus says: "It is the Spirit that gives life" (Jn 6.63).

11. Cf. Jn 15.10,12

Just as breath is essential for natural life, so is the Holy Spirit, who is considered as the divine breath breathed by the risen Christ,¹² That is why Jesus insisted: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (Jn 3.5).

Death has no power over this life. In other words, the death that naturally occurs to human beings cannot terminate this life. So Jesus revealed to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn 11.25-26). But the real enemy that can destroy this life is sin. For John writes: "Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 Jn 3.15). Another special feature of this life is that it is a present reality. Unlike the Gnostics who transferred eternal life to an almost inaccessible world beyond time and space, John says that this life can be possessed by human beings here and now in so far as they live according to the teaching of Jesus Christ and remain united with him.¹³ For this life has seeds of eternity within it. So Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "... the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4.14). Such a life has started in a believer here and now.¹⁴ The resurrection of the believer on the last day is only a consequence of the present possession of eternal life.

In the book of Revelation the Johannine thought concentrates on the eschatological aspect of life. The Visionary sees the Son of Man in the figure of a victorious slain lamb who says: "I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1.17-18). A new heaven and a new earth is envisaged at the end of the world, when "God himself will be with them: he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away (Rev 21.3-4). Thus the

12. Cf. Jn 20.22

13. Cf. Colin Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, U.K., 1976, p. 482

14. Cf. Jn 5.24; 6.47

Johannine thought helps us to understand life as eternal life, which has the double aspects of already and not yet. But if we possess this divine life in our present life we can be sure of its full enjoyment after death.

9. Life Culminating in Resurrection

St. Paul points out to the fact of Jesus' resurrection as a proof for the power of divine life over death. For he says: "For this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (Rom 14.9). Through his resurrection, Christ has become the author of a new life for humankind. Comparing Christ with Adam Paul says: "If because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Rom 5.17-18). Paul perceives that the life of Christians is not in fact their own but the life of Christ who lives in them: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2.20). The life of Christ is imparted to the believers through the word of life (Phil 2.16) and through the creative power of the Spirit: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom 8.11).

The new life in the believer is manifested in his / her life of service for others. So Paul says: "None of us lives to himself" (Rom 4.7). "And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Co 5.15). It is a life for God. "The death he (Christ) died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6.10-11). This new life is essentially a life in the Spirit, which finds its expressions in the virtues oriented to others such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5.22).

This new life has started in the believer, but it is not fully realized now. This tension between the already and not yet can be seen in Paul's statements: "For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3.3-4). We possess eternal life now as in a seed: "Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8.23). Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of our own future resurrection to an eternal life: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Co 15.22). One can attain this future resurrection to eternal life only if he/she lives a life according to the Spirit: "For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal 6.8). Paul thinks of the future life as a bodily life. This may be because in the Hebrew thought life could not be conceived of in a disembodied state. Paul says that just as a seed that is sowed dies and a new plant body emerges out of it, keeping however the essential nature of the seed, so the mortal body perishes with death and a new glorious body emerges at resurrection.¹⁵ This new state of life will involve seeing God face to face.¹⁶ It is entering into the kingdom of God, which "does not mean food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14.17). It is a state of being with Christ for ever.¹⁷

Conclusion

Our short study reveals the christian understanding of and attitude towards life. Human life is unique and superior to all other forms of life in the creation. It does not end with the natural death of the body. It continues to live for ever. But that eternal life could be one of perfect happiness or of utter misery according to the life one lives here on earth. Human life becomes meaningful only when it turns out to be eternal. This emergence of ordinary human life into an eternal life occurs only when human beings participate in the very life of the eternal God through a life of faith, love and obedience.

15. Cf. 1 Co 15.35ff; 2 Co 5.1ff.

16. Cf. 1 Co 13.12

17. Cf. 1 Thess 4.17; 2 Co 5.8; Phil 1.23