

# BECOMING *a New* PERSON

What the Bible Teaches About Regeneration,  
Renewal, and Christ-Likeness

ERIC H.H. CHANG

REVISED EDITION  
VOLUME ONE



# BECOMING A NEW PERSON (VOLUME 1)

The topic of salvation is so deep and wide that few Christians are able to expound it beyond familiar statements such as “We are justified by faith” or “For God so loved the world ...” Biblical salvation is a vast subject, yet its full compass can be delineated by the three main elements of salvation as we find them in the Bible: *regeneration*, *renewal*, and *perfection* (Christ-likeness). Not only do these terms lend themselves to biblically accurate systematization, they are concepts thoroughly rooted in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

In this two-volume work, Eric H.H. Chang expounds the rich aspects of salvation in a style that is both homiletic and expository. The result is a presentation that is lucid and personal, yet also technical and exegetical. An undercurrent of hope permeates this work, reflecting a pastor’s concern that all may arrive at a spiritual breakthrough in their Christian lives, by becoming new people in Christ.



ERIC H.H. CHANG was born in Shanghai, and came to know God in post-liberation China through a series of miracles. He graduated from the Bible Training Institute (Glasgow), London Bible College, and the University of London (Arts and Divinity, King’s College and SOAS). He has done pastoral work in England, Canada, and Hong Kong.

His publications include *The Only True God: A Study of Biblical Monotheism* and *The Only Perfect Man: The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ*.

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*a New*  
PERSON



WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT  
REGENERATION, RENEWAL, AND  
CHRIST-LIKENESS

Revised Edition

VOLUME 1

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ERIC H.H. CHANG

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August 9, 2020



BECOMING  
*a New*  
PERSON



ERIC H.H. CHANG

Revised by Bentley C.F. Chan

VOLUME 1

CDC  
Publishers



Christian Disciples Church  
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Becoming a New Person: What the Bible Teaches About  
Regeneration, Renewal, and Christ-likeness, Volume 1

By Eric H.H. Chang, Revised by Bentley C.F. Chan  
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# DEDICATION



To all the faithful disciples  
of Jesus Christ in China who  
“loved not their lives even unto death”  
(Revelation 12:11)

Because of their lives,  
and sometimes also because of their death,  
“the Lord added to the church daily  
those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47);  
this He continues to do in large numbers  
up to this present day.




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## FOREWORD

his collection of 32 messages on Biblical salvation, in two volumes, comes from the pulpit ministry of Pastor Eric H.H. Chang, which spanned several decades and was based mainly in Montreal, Canada. His messages have spoken powerfully to many in Canada and Asia, and are now made available to a wider audience.

Few Christians are able to expound salvation in any depth beyond familiar statements such as “We are justified by faith” or “For God so loved the world ...” Although Biblical salvation is a vast subject, its full compass can be delineated by the three main elements of salvation as we find them in the Bible: *regeneration*, *renewal*, and *perfection* (Christ-likeness). Not only do these terms lend themselves to biblically accurate systematization, they are concepts thoroughly rooted in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

In this work, Chang expounds the rich aspects of salvation in a style that is both homiletic and expository. The result is a presentation that is lucid and personal, yet also technical and exegetical. It is suitable for Christians and non-Christians, lay people and church leaders alike. An undercurrent of hope permeates this work, reflecting a pastor’s concern that all may arrive at a spiritual breakthrough in their Christian lives.

This work is uncompromising in its adherence to Scripture, and does not hesitate to question any doctrine, whether from church tradition or contemporary Christianity, that is not rooted in biblical teaching. However, the tone is not dogmatic or combative, but irenic, open-minded, and intellectually engaging. I am confident that it will foster a systematic and biblically-based grasp of salvation.

This second edition is a refinement of the original edition of 2004. It has a smoother flow of writing achieved mainly by removing the repetition that is natural and desirable in preaching but is not needed in writing. It also incorporates Eric Chang's mature reassessment of certain biblical and theological themes. The book is now divided into two print volumes for easier reading.

In June 2010, Eric Chang gave me full freedom to revise the second edition of this work, just as he had previously given me full freedom to work on the first edition right up to the penultimate draft.

For this second edition, I express my heartfelt gratitude to Winston Lam, my friend and brother for four decades. He proofread the manuscript, and made numerous helpful suggestions related to grammar and style. My deepest thanks also to Pastor Bruce Lyon of Ottawa for his constant encouragement, and for expressing the hope that this revised edition will see the light of day for the benefit of God's people.

It is our hope and confidence that this work will fulfill the goal that its author, Eric Chang, had always had for his books: the glory of God and the edification of God's people in Jesus Christ.

Bentley C.F. Chan (Editor)  
biblicalmonotheism@gmail.com  
October 29, 2019





## PREFACE

Most Christians will admit that they have little understanding of the fundamentals of salvation. In Biblical teaching, salvation can be described by the terms *regeneration*, *renewal*, and *perfection* as its three main elements. Most Christians are unfamiliar with any of these terms, and are generally uninformed of what it means to be saved. Their understanding of so important a matter as salvation is often limited to a few scattered verses of the Bible which they are unable to draw together into a coherent framework. This is alarming for it indicates that the average Christian doesn't really know what it means to be a Christian. And Christians who don't know what it is to be a Christian are, in effect, Christians who are non-Christians. For how can we be Christians without knowing what the basic principles of the Christian life are?

Many Christians, when they hear that *dying* with Christ is the first step in becoming a new person in Christ (Romans 6:3-5), are so taken aback by it that they wonder if this is some new doctrine. And in the case of those who have at least heard of it, they usually do not know what dying with Christ means exactly, other than that it has some kind of symbolic meaning. But if dying with Christ is merely symbolic, it would follow that rising with him in resurrection is

also symbolic. The message of the Gospel deals mainly with practical *reality*, with real life, and not just symbols and concepts.

Other Christians consider themselves well informed for being able to explain salvation in terms of a substitutionary theology, yet without explaining how it brings out the meaning of dying with Christ. All too often, its practical application, which is where its primary importance lies, is buried under quasi-theological jargon. As a result, the meaning of the new life in Christ is lost from view and, with it, the hope of living victoriously in our daily Christian walk.

As for the crucial element of *perfection* in the Biblical teaching on salvation, it is a subject that most preachers discreetly avoid, regarded as a daunting theme to be sidestepped. The thinking of most teachers and preachers probably goes like this: “If it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved” (1Peter 4:18), why make the Christian life more difficult by bringing up the subject of perfection, and with it the sinister shadows of “perfectionism”?

This work first took shape through a series of messages preached over a period of three years, the first of which was delivered in August 1982. They were made available in the tape libraries of a number of churches and published in condensed form in *Oasis*, the newsletter of Christian Disciples Church.

It was not until Bentley Chan coordinated the transcription of the messages and edited them to make the messages more readable in written form that there was an impetus to

bringing this book into being. Were it not for Bentley's dedication, determination and, above all, devotion to God, it is not at all certain when this work in its present form could have reached the general reader. Moreover, the Lord had given him the insight by which he perceived the spiritual importance of these messages on salvation, which he felt ought to be made available to a wider audience. I wish, therefore, to record my heartfelt gratitude to Pastor Bentley for his enormous contribution. He has also done, in the midst of his busy schedule, the proofreading and the formatting, and prepared the Scripture index. Even though it is my obligation and joy to acknowledge my thanks to him, it was of course not my gratitude he sought in the first place. Rather, it is the "well done my good and faithful servant" which he seeks from the Lord that motivates him. I am certain that, by God's bountiful grace, he will not fail to receive that commendation on that Day.

In my final editing, much of the material had been rewritten to reduce even further the colloquialisms which still remained, to improve the flow of thought where needed, and to add supplementary material where more clarification was called for. Where the supplementary material was extensive, an Appended Note would be added at the end of the chapter. As a result of these additions, about one third of the material is new.

Those conscious of literary style will notice variations in style in the book. Some sections retain more of the casual colloquial style of the original messages as they were

delivered from the pulpit, whereas supplementary material added later has a more literary style.

Though based on careful exegesis, this work is not meant to be an academic discourse on soteriology, but is addressed to everyone who is concerned about the vital matter of salvation.

It remains for me to state, even though it should be self-evident, that responsibility for any infelicities, inadequacies, or mistakes rests solely with me. Every time I re-read the manuscript, I feel that something could be improved. But if I carry on in this fashion, I suppose the book may never reach the publishers.

Given the constraints of administrative responsibilities, I must now leave the work as it stands, realizing that absolute perfection is unattainable in this present age. We must therefore be content with a relative perfection, if by God's grace we can attain even that. May the Lord our Redeemer be glorified in spite of our "spots" and "wrinkles" (cf. Eph.5:27). May God's church be built up in these last days, and may the word of His mighty and wondrous salvation reach the ends of the earth.

Eric Chang

August, 2004

Montreal, Canada

# INTRODUCTION: A SURVEY OF THE BROAD THEMES IN THIS BOOK

## **Becoming a new person**

The good news proclaimed in the Gospel (which means “good news”) is that no one is condemned to remain shackled to an old and futile way of life, but that everyone can be redeemed and made new in Jesus Christ. Man no longer needs to eke out his earthly existence in the gloom of perpetual spiritual darkness, unable to see the meaning of life or free himself from a sense of futility. This amazing message of hope is expressed in the revolutionary declaration, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2Cor.5:17, NIV). We need to let these words be absorbed into our comprehension so as to feel their power and significance. We need to savor these words until their meaning dawns on us. We can then take hold of them and experience their reality.

Man has long aspired to something better and more enduring in life. How much blood has been shed through

wars and revolutions in the hope of establishing a better world? But how can human society change for the better unless man himself is changed?

But man cannot change himself. He can make self-improvements, but these never add up to a fundamental transformation. “Can the leopard change its spots?” (Jer. 13:23) We can no more change ourselves than we can change our own skin. Only God can transform us from the inside out and make of us a “new creation”.

The message of the New Testament is that God has made this possible through Jesus Christ, calling us “out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1Pet.2:9). “For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). He frees us from the enslavement to sin which controlled our old way of life, in order that we may enter “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom.8:21). He liberates us from the powers of evil which dominate life in this world, and empowers us towards a new life in Christ.

In becoming a new person, we “die” to our old life and lifestyle. Our old ego—the “old self” (Rom.6:6)—is terminated through our being united with the crucified Christ. Then we will receive a new identity as God’s children through the risen Christ living in us.

## **“New creation” and “regeneration”**

The New Testament has two ways of describing this remarkable process of becoming a new person. First, it is described as a new birth, a birth from above, a spiritual birth, in contrast to physical birth (Jn.3:3-7). This is what is called “regeneration”. The other way it is described, especially in Paul’s letters, is “a new creation” or “a new creature” (2Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15), that is, a whole new person created in the image of Christ.

Whichever description is used, the emphasis is on the newness of the person in Christ. In the New Testament, only a new person—a regenerated person created anew in Christ—is a “Christian”. Being a Christian is not merely a profession of faith, or church membership, or the preserving of observances, or a cultural heritage, but what one *is*. In the New Testament, no one is a Christian who does not have the life of Christ in him or her, or in whom the Spirit of God does not dwell.

## **Grace and faith**

The transformation of the old into the new is nothing less than a miracle of God’s power to save. The old is under the curse of death; everything in the world which is alive will become old and die. But God reverses this process by bringing life out of death through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Those who live in the bondage of death can now receive the life of Christ, when God fashions out of the

clay of the old life a whole new person. Such a person has “passed out of death into life” (1Jn.3:14). This amazing gift of life and transformation is what the New Testament calls “grace”. The one who places himself in God’s hands, believing that He can make us new persons as we obey Him wholeheartedly, is the one who has what the New Testament calls “faith”. This faith is a living relationship with the living God who gives us new life.

Faith recognizes that to establish this new relationship with God, the old relationship with our old self, or ego, has to be terminated. The old “I” has to die so that the new person in Christ can live. The old and the new are incompatible, with no compromise between them ever possible, a fact that is borne out in practical experience. Because this matter of dying is of the utmost importance, we will address it in the first two chapters.

No one will ever enter God’s kingdom unless he or she has been regenerated by God’s power in Christ. That is to say, only those who have been made new will be saved and receive the fullness of eternal life.

God is carrying out, quietly and powerfully, an eternal plan to create new people in the midst of an old and dying world. Those who, by His grace, have experienced His transforming power will know this to be true. This hidden process, which Jesus describes as seed growing in the earth (Mt.13:3-9), is also what Paul describes as God’s mystery being revealed in this present age (1Cor.2:7; Eph.1:9, 3:3,9, 6:19; Rom.16:25 etc.).



## Perfection is integral to regeneration and renewal

Looking at the three words, *regeneration*, *renewal*, and *perfection*, one might suppose that these refer to the past, the present, and the future of salvation neatly summed up. But in this study, we will discover that this is not exactly the case. Perfection is actually involved in all three stages of salvation.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us that the new life in Christ begins with our being “perfected”—that is, freed from both the guilt and the power of sin through Christ’s atoning sacrifice, without which there is no possibility of regeneration or renewal.

Christ is the standard of perfection. It is in God’s eternal purpose that we be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29). His conforming us to Christ’s image requires the process of *renewal*, which has final *perfection* as its ultimate goal.

We reach final perfection when we “attain to the fullness of the stature of Christ” (Eph.4:13). Hence perfection is not a topic that can be relegated to a footnote in a discussion on salvation, but one that overarches, or underlies, all three stages of salvation. It is for this reason that perfection takes up a substantial portion of this book.

It emerges from all this that perfection cannot be relegated to the sphere of moral theology or ethics, and then left to wither in the shade of neglect, as is happening today. Since perfection is connected to every aspect of salvation in the New Testament, a failure to understand the Biblical

teaching on perfection will result in a failure to understand the Biblical teaching on salvation as a whole.

Biblical perfection serves as the standard, direction, goal, and vision of the new life in Christ. Its neglect inevitably results in the poverty, even bankruptcy, of the Christian life.

## **Regeneration and renewal**

The word “regeneration” is found only twice in the New Testament (Mt.19:28; Titus 3:5), but it conveniently serves as a term to describe the starting point of the new life in Christ. Since life begins with birth, we can describe its beginning using terms such as “born from above,” “born anew,” or “born again,” as in John chapter 3. A new beginning can also be described as a new creation or a new creature. The term *regeneration* comprehends all these ways of depicting a new beginning.

Whereas *regeneration* denotes the one-time inception of the new life in Christ, *renewal* encompasses the ongoing growth and development of the new life from its nascence to its final maturity. Renewal spans our earthly sojourn, with Christ as the model or template of the renewal process. Renewal is the *process* of being perfected or being conformed to Christ’s image, according to the Father’s predestined or predetermined plan.

## **Perfection as Christ-likeness**

Since Christ in the New Testament defines the content and meaning of perfection, I had considered the possibility of replacing the word “perfection” with “Christ-likeness”. But it soon became apparent that this could not be done without causing some confusion. For example, in the statement, “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48), the word “perfect” cannot simply be replaced by “Christ-like” without further ado, because the result, “as your heavenly Father is Christ-like,” would be problematic. The same is true of the word “perfected” in Hebrews and elsewhere. Therefore, although Christ is the substance of perfection, the word “perfect” is not redundant and still serves as a useful vehicle to convey the treasure within it.

## **The use of the words “church” and “churches”**

In this work the term “church” refers to the body of Christ on earth, without specific reference to denominational or local expressions of his body, whereas “churches” refers to the local or regional expressions of the church on earth. The term “the body of Christ on earth” is used with the intention of emphasizing that we are not referring to the spiritual or “mystical” church of Christ.

When this book expresses criticism of the spiritual state of the church or churches, it is not meant as a censure of all churches except my own! No lambasting of any particular denomination or group of churches is ever intended. The

intention is rather that of *self-criticism* in order to bring us to an awareness of the spiritually impoverished condition of the church of God on earth at the present time. The hope is that such awareness will motivate and even propel us in the heavenly direction to which God has called us.

In recent years, several scandals have been given wide publicity in the news media. Prominent among these are those of televangelists (Protestant, Charismatic) and those of priests (Roman Catholic). It would not be right, however, to argue that the acts of corrupt elements within a church (whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox) proves that the whole church is corrupt. But it also cannot be denied that these could be symptoms of deeper problems in the churches. Our concern is with the general failure of Christians to live up to the standards so clearly laid down in the Scriptures, and to find the root causes of this failure so that these may be treated. The substandard Christianity that characterizes the church generally is a cause of alarm to all who love her and love the Lord who redeemed her with his blood.

### **“Baptized heathen”**

Some time back, a striking phrase in a book by an eminent European scholar seized my attention and became stuck in my mind ever since. In the book he lamented that the churches in the West are filled with “baptized heathen”. The situation, alas, is almost universal. But the fact that these

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people remain “heathen” even after being baptized is not always, or entirely, their fault. The problem is that the church leaders often fail to teach what being a true Christian means. But again this is not necessarily entirely their fault either, for they too were not properly taught. Regeneration, renewal, and perfection are not usually taught in theological colleges as standard topics.

How then can churches avoid being filled with “baptized heathen”? This book seeks to address this deadly problem which threatens the life of the church at its core, not in terms of its being a cultural or religious entity but as the living and effective body of Christ.

Reputable colleges and universities admit students only after they have met certain standards such as passing certain examinations; and the better the academic institution, the more stringent the requirements. The church is not an academic institution, but is spiritual in character. The requirements are therefore spiritual, not academic. But does it mean that being spiritual involves no requirements or standards? Is it not the case that spiritual requirements are no less important than academic ones, but in fact more so? Is it any less important to repent of sin than to pass an examination? Is moral excellence any less important than academic excellence? Is being spiritual any less important than being learned? Why then are we so lax in our spiritual standards?

If good academic institutions have stringent entrance requirements, how is it that many churches have virtually no

*spiritual* requirements to speak of? Are these requirements not clearly stated in the Scriptures? Why then do we ignore them to the extent that people are admitted into the church of God with the greatest ease, meeting only superficial requirements, if any? Baptism is often administered without serious preparation on the part of the candidate. This being the case, we must ask again: How can the church avoid being filled with “baptized heathen” and thus become heathenized? How can the church avoid sinking into conformity with the world, and losing its spiritual identity? “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men” (Mt.5:13).

### **The passive view of grace**

Another cause for concern is that the dynamic view of grace has given way to a passive view of grace in many sections of the church, notably Protestant churches. But is the passive view more God-centered? Or is it more self-centered? We shall see that it is the dynamic view of grace that is God-centered.

Is the statement, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), limited to giving to men but not to God? Is it supposed that we have nothing to give to God? What about the giving of our very selves to God, not to mention our possessions, gifts, time, energy, love, obedience, worship, and praise? All that we are and have, we have

received from Him as the gift of grace. But is our offering to God of the gifts of His grace not the result of His grace at work *in us* “to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil.2:13)?

Is grace counted as grace only when it is something we passively receive, but not when it inspires and empowers us to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves? In other words, is loving God and neighbor our own achievement, or is it a crowning work of God’s dynamic grace in us? If the latter is true, then the Lord’s words, “It is more blessed to give than to receive,” are true on both the *horizontal* level of human relationships as well as the *vertical* relationship with God. This is the *cruciform* character of grace. This is not to deny that it is also blessed to receive, for if we had received nothing from God, we would have nothing to give. But having received, it is more blessed to give than to keep for ourselves what we received.

## **Rivers of the “living water” of God’s grace**

Giving leads to another divine principle: “Give, and it will be given to you” (Lk.6:38). If we keep to ourselves the grace we have received, that will be all the grace we will receive, and even that we may not be able to keep. It is in giving that we receive even more. This becomes a cycle of receiving and giving, giving and receiving: an ever expanding flow of the rivers of grace. It is ever expanding because what will be given us *after* we have given what we had first received, will

not be the same as what we have given, but far more: “It will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over” (Lk.6:38). What begins as a trickling stream of grace will grow into a mighty river of God’s grace, and even many rivers. This is the picture in John 7:38, where “living water” beautifully portrays God’s grace, while “rivers” depict its overflowing abundance.

Here we glimpse the purpose of Jesus’ coming into the world, “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Just how much more abundantly is largely determined by our attitude; we can’t blame God if we don’t find ourselves enjoying the promised abundance. How much we receive depends on the measure of our giving. If we give stingily, though we may receive more than we have given, we will receive less than if we had given generously: “By your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return” (Lk.6:38). A stinting attitude towards God and man will diminish the abundance of grace we will experience. We urgently need, therefore, to be delivered from the passive attitude of a “give me” view of grace, to a dynamic “give me to give” attitude of grace.

God’s grace in us is active, transforming our lives and energizing us to live for His glory. When we receive the gift of life in Christ, it will express itself in all that we think and do. If we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, how can we not produce the fruit of the Spirit? Are love, joy, peace, gentleness and self-control purely passive qualities?



Regeneration, renewal and perfection constitute a progression from grace to grace, or “grace upon grace” (Jn.1:16). It is to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2Pet.3:18).

## **The use of the word “Christian”**

The word “Christian” appears three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1Pet.4:16). But already in New Testament times, there was the possibility of a believer or Christian conducting himself in so substandard a manner that he could be described as “worse than an unbeliever” (1Tim.5:8). The use of the term “Christian” does not of itself guarantee that the person described by it is one who meets the Biblical standards of being a new person in Christ.

Today the term “Christian” may, on the one hand, mean nothing more than that one belongs to a Christian society or culture, or is a member of the Christian religion, but who in reality may have no religious convictions at all. On the other hand, the word “Christian” is also applied to a person who has a deep faith in Christ. This wide range of meaning makes the word vague and imprecise, rendering it almost useless.

Yet we cannot completely avoid using the term “Christian” because there is no commonly recognized word that distinguishes genuine Christians from nominal Christians. We could use the word “saint” in its Biblical meaning, but most are unfamiliar with its true meaning. “Believer” is

not a lot more precise than “Christian”. Without qualification, even the word “disciple” does not necessarily imply that a person so described is a faithful believer. We recall that Judas was a disciple of Jesus, even an apostle. We are therefore obliged to use words such as *genuine*, *committed*, or *true* to qualify “Christian”. The difficulties that beset the term “Christian” are symptomatic of the problems that beset the lives of Christians in general.

### **Understanding “perfection” in the Bible**

It is essential that we grasp Biblical perfection clearly and accurately, for there is general confusion on the subject, one that is detrimental to the Christian life. For example, many are unable to tell the difference between perfection and what is called “perfectionism”. For this reason, we will discuss perfectionism later in this book. The failure to understand and apply the Biblical teaching on the vital subject of perfection will leave the Christian life in a state of spiritual paralysis seen in a lack of goal, direction, and motivation.

But as soon as we try to understand perfection, we are confronted by what appear to be contradictions. But the apparently contradictory statements are actually markers that define the nature of perfection. For example, in Philippians 3, Paul speaks of his being perfect and not perfect almost in the same breath! He uses the same basic word for “perfect” in two places (in the original Greek text): verse 12, “not that I have already become perfect”; but also

verse 15, “let us as many as are perfect”. Similarly, John says that those born of God do not sin (1John 5:18), yet John also speaks of confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness (1:9).

Even *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* seems unable to provide a better solution than to suggest *different levels of perfection*, without explaining what this means exactly. Without a satisfactory explanation, the suggestion only complicates the problem, for a low level of perfection is, by its own admission, less than perfect and cannot be properly called “perfection”.

In contrast to a confused attempt at a resolution, the Bible’s answer is remarkably clear and consistent. But to grasp the answer, it is necessary to know that Scripture distinguishes between volition and action, the internal and the external, the heart and the body, the mind and the flesh. The distinction comes out sharply in Romans chapter seven, “for to *will* is present with me, but how to *perform* what is good I do not find” (v.18, NKJV). The chapter is summed up in the concluding words, “So then, with the *mind* I myself serve the law of God, but with the *flesh* the law of sin” (v.25).

This highlights the crucial distinction between the *intention* of the heart and its *implementation* in action. It is possible to be perfect in the heart, the intention, and the will, without these translating into perfect action or a perfect life. That is because of the flesh, in which sin dwells. Yet the very next chapter, Romans 8, say that in Christ the dominion of sin is broken and we are no longer under bondage to it. But

even the one who is freed from bondage to sin must go on “putting to death the deeds of the body” (v.13). The flesh will keep on fighting the spirit or the Spirit in us, as is stated in Galatians 5:17 and as we know from our own experience.

Hence it is possible to be *perfect on the level of the heart* in our commitment to God, loving and serving Him with all our hearts, yet find that in the implementation of that perfect intention, the result is less than perfect. Yet we also know that the implementation improves as we gain victory after victory over the flesh in our lifelong battle with it. The believer is in the paradoxical situation of being perfect and imperfect at the same time, though in different respects.

It is now clear what Paul means when he says that he is perfect—perfect in his total and unconditional commitment and devotion to God—while on the other hand he is imperfect. He must battle with the self in the form of an ever lurking pride, for which the Lord had provided him with a thorn in the flesh to help subdue it (2Cor.12:7).

John says that those who are born of God do not want to sin because their hearts are perfect towards God, yet they do sin because of “the one who is in the world” (1John 4:4), referring to the evil one who tempts them through their spiritual immaturity, in order to put in their hearts a place for idols, the things (even good things) which take over God’s central place in the heart. In fact John’s letter ends with a warning about idols. The strategy of the evil one is to go straight for the heart and lure it away from God, to destroy their perfection of heart. That the enemy has

succeeded in doing this to many people can be seen from the fact that antichrists have gone out from the church (1Jn.2:18,19).

To repeat, perfection in the *heart* often means—and does mean—less than perfect in *deed*. It is this truth that I aim to bring out when I repeat, at various points in this book, that *perfection does not mean the total eradication of sin in us, but victory over sin*. Despite having a perfect heart, we often fail for lack of spiritual knowledge. Hence it is vital that we grow in knowledge and understanding, even if we, in the process of growing, make mistakes and fall into sin. On these occasions, we confess our sins, and thank God from our hearts that we have an Advocate with the Father, namely, Jesus our Lord (1Jn.2:1).

### **Biblical perfection: both present and future**

Beyond the vital distinction between intention and deed in which perfection in the former is possible but not always in the latter, there is another distinction which explains the paradoxes seen in Paul and John.

In speaking of perfection in Scripture, it is crucial to distinguish between *perfection of love* and *perfection of character*. The former is realizable in the present age, the latter only in the age to come.

The “perfect love” spoken of in 1John 4:12 (“God abides in us and His love is perfected in us”) has to do with the

present time, not with something that will become a reality only in heaven.

*Perfection of love.* Matthew 5:48 (“be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”) is pivotal to Jesus’ teaching on love, including love for the enemy, which is possible only when love is “perfected” (1Jn. 2:5). The perfection mentioned in Matthew 5:48 pertains to *love*, and is realizable in the present age by God’s power. Indeed, Jesus requires it of his disciples. It is a wholehearted obedience to the command to love, by God’s grace (Mark 12:29-31). This can and must be done in the present age. Since God has made that love available to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), we are without excuse if we do not obey His call to perfect love.

*Perfection of character.* In Philippians 3, Paul aspires to a perfect conformity with Christ even though it will mean conforming to his suffering and death (v.10), which Paul gladly accepts. Conforming to Christ means conforming to his perfect character, a process which Romans 8:29 describes as conforming to his “image”. But Paul acknowledges that he has not yet attained it (v.12); indeed it is not fully attainable until the final resurrection and transformation of our bodies in the age to come (Phil.3:21).

That we cannot attain perfect Christ-likeness in the present age is related to the fact that we cannot attain sinlessness in the present age. Christ “committed no sin” (1Pet.2:22) in his body of flesh. But so long as we are still in our bodies of flesh, the battle between flesh and spirit will

continue to rage all through our earthly lives. But if we gain victory over the flesh day by day through the Spirit, we will grow in Christ-likeness until we are granted his perfect likeness in the age to come.

## **Spiritual insights of a martyr**

Shortly before completing this manuscript, I providentially came across some valuable insights on perfection in a message preached over 50 years ago by Yu Chenghua, a physician who was an elder of a large congregation in Shanghai. Dr. Yu was martyred for his faith in 1956 for refusing to deny the Lord and betray his fellow church leaders. The depth of his spiritual insight can be seen in his collected messages now made available under the title, *Walking with God*. An English translation is not, to my knowledge, available at present. *Walking with God* is my own translation of the title, *Yu Shen Tong Xing*. I have also translated the following extracts from his book which are his comments on obeying the command to be perfect and attaining to perfection, that is, to Christ-likeness:

Someone may ask, “Is it at all possible for our lives to grow to the fullness of Christ’s stature? Can being perfect like Christ become a reality in our lives?” My answer is: It is possible, definitely possible! Because:

Firstly, when God does things He does not play around, saying something but is unable to do it. Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus.”

We should take “workmanship” to mean “masterpiece,” that is, “God’s finest piece of work” or “God’s most glorious work”. Just how great God’s capabilities are will be revealed in this work, and will count as God’s “masterpiece”. It is a work that will demonstrate for the principalities and powers in heaven to see: How good, how beautiful, how perfect, how glorious, how like Christ is God’s work. Such a work is definitely worthy of being called God’s masterpiece.

This being the case, brothers and sisters, do you still think that God is unable to accomplish it, that He cannot make us Christ-like? The work is wholly in God’s hands. If you think that God cannot achieve it, how offensive and dishonoring to God is such a thought! If you have any reverence for God, this notion, that God is unable, must not be entertained in your mind for one moment. Please remember, is there anything too difficult for the Lord to accomplish? God’s plan is that those “whom God foreknew” must “be conformed to the image of His Son”—become like the Son [Rom.8:29].

Secondly, look at Matthew 5:48, “Therefore you must be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This is a command. Those who know God will know that all God’s commands are God’s promises. So whatever He commands you to do, you will certainly be able to do it. God will never command you to do something you are unable to do. You can say that God’s commands are His promises because God will certainly enable you to do them. It is a command to be perfect in love like the heavenly Father. This is possible to do because the Lord would never command a two-year-old



child to carry a hundred-pound load. Since God has commanded us, we are certainly capable of it. Remember that God is almighty, and that all things are possible to him who believes.

Thirdly, let me tell you in all earnestness that we the church are Christ. We are the “much fruit (many grains of wheat)” produced by the one “grain of wheat”—Christ—which fell to the ground and died [John 12:24]. Every grain among these many grains of wheat is like that original grain of wheat. If you plant beans you get beans, if you plant melons you get melons, if you plant Christ you will get Christ. We are not only like him, we are actually him—the church is an embodiment (or manifestation) of Christ; and if we “are him,” how can we not be like him? [Yu Chenghua 俞成华, *Walking With God* 与神同行, 1999, pp.176-177, Chinese Christian Testimony Ministry, Alhambra, CA, USA.]

## “We are Christ”

Dr. Yu’s last point is interesting for its boldness. He goes beyond stating that we can be like Christ; he wants to establish that we “are” Christ. If the latter is true, then the former is self-evident, as Yu himself says, “If we ‘*are* him,’ how can we not be like him?”

But to state that we “are” Christ without further clarification than is given in that excerpt could lead to misunderstanding. In itself the point being made is clear enough. Brother Yu bases his case on the truism that what

you sow is what you reap. He quotes a Chinese proverb about beans and melons, but he could just as easily have quoted the apostle Paul, “whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Gal.6:7). The point is simply that in reproducing itself, every grain of wheat is genetically replicated in the grains which spring forth from it. What the first grain was, those which spring forth from it are. Hence we “are Christ” and replicas of Christ, having been replicated from him. Or as Yu puts it, we are his “embodiment”.

It would have been sufficient for establishing Christ-likeness to say that every seed that springs forth from the original seed is completely *like* the original seed genetically. Yet it must also be noted that the many grains which spring forth from the original grain are *not* the original grain itself. Even so, they do contain the life, and with it the genetic code, of the original seed. This guarantees that the many seeds which spring forth from the original one will be *exactly like* it.

It is this likeness that brother Yu describes as our “being Christ,” perhaps like the case of identical twins: the one can fully represent the other in terms of likeness, and “is” the other in terms of representation. Even so, one identical twin is *not* the other, for he is a different individual. That the one can fully represent the other does not mean that they are the one and same person.

Dr. Yu may have overstated his case, yet I find it to be thought provoking and imbued with something of great

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value. The inescapable fact remains, even after the overstatement has been recognized, that *the life* of the original seed—Christ, in this case—is now *in us* who have sprung forth into life through him. Or, put in another way, it can be incontrovertibly stated that “Christ is our life” (Col.3:4). His life is embodied in us, and is manifested through us. If we manifest his life, what else would that mean but that we are seen to be *like him*? *Christ-likeness necessarily stems from Christ’s life in us*. If it is true that “Christ lives in me,” then it is also true that he must be seen in me.

It seems that this is really what brother Yu wants to affirm. He goes beyond saying that it is *possible* to become like Christ, asserting that it is *inevitable*. This is an insight of great importance, one which is convincingly demonstrated in his exposition of the seed. With the assurance that if Christ is our life, we will inevitably become like him, we proceed to the main body of this book.



## Chapter 1



# WE WHO DIED TO SIN

“How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”  
(Romans 6:2)

### Why begin by talking about death?

Since this book is concerned with the vital matter of *life*—the new life through becoming a new person—why are we talking about *death*? The reason is that the new cannot come until the old has passed away. Paul says of the new person in Christ that “the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2Cor.5:17).

How shall we explain this profound topic of life and death, of the new and the old? We begin by way of parable, using two illustrations, a short one taken from Chinese

history and a longer one regarding the struggle with insomnia, before we proceed to the formal Scriptural teaching on dying with Christ.

### **To weep or to rejoice?**

The following is a brief but thought-provoking account of an event that took place in Chinese history, involving Duke Qing who led the state of Qi from 598 to 582 BC:

When Duke Qing of Qi saw the beautiful scenery in the north where his country lies, tears fell from his eyes. And with a sob, he said, “How beautiful are our fruitful plains ... But our lives are as short as the water in the river that passes by.” After he spoke, he wailed aloud. Ai Kong and Liang Qiuzhu wept with him. But Yan Zi laughed alone by the side. As Duke Qing wiped his tears from his eyes, he asked, “We are all weeping here, why is it that you are laughing?” Yan Zi said, “It is your meaningless mourning I am laughing at. If the length of men’s lives were not so short, how then would it be possible for you to be the Prince of Qi?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This story is from *Yan-Zu Chun Qiu*. The translation is probably by J. Legge, but since I do not have access to the Chinese text or the English translation, the extract used here is drawn from *Encyclopedia of 7000 Illustrations* by P.L. Tan, Assurance Publishers, 11th edition, 1990, p.305. Chinese names have been converted from the old Wade-Giles system to standard Pinyin.

Who was right, those who wept or the one who laughed? Both were right, but for different reasons. The calamitous reign of death over humankind because of man's sin is cause for the deepest grief. Yet in God's plan and purpose, death serves an important function: to remove the old, making way for the new. If the old does not pass, how can the new come? It is this truth that Yan Zi perceived so clearly. *Is the coming of the new not a cause for rejoicing?* Amidst a sea of sorrow is an island of gladness.

The Gospel is such an island in the ocean of death. In God's wisdom, even death is made to serve the advancement of life. If we focus our sight solely on the reality of death, then we must weep like those in the story. But when we see life emerging out of death, we have reason to rejoice. Yan Zi, remarkably for one who did not have opportunity to know the Gospel, had a glimpse of a vital truth, the fullness of which came to light in Jesus Christ.

This vital principle, that the new life in Christ comes into our lives only when the old has passed away, is something we must firmly grasp if we are to understand and apply the message of the Gospel of a new life in Christ. We will return to this foundational truth in various places in this book, to gain an ever clearer insight into it.

In this connection we see yet another significant truth: physical life begins with birth and ends in death, but *the spiritual life begins with death, and through death enters life*. The death which is in union with Christ is the gateway to new life, eternal life.

## Simple yet hard to explain

In various ways, the Word of God speaks of the believer as having *died* to sin,<sup>2</sup> to the “old man” we once were, and to our old way of life under sin’s power. What does this dying mean in the Bible?

Dying is hard to explain precisely because it is so simple. It is like trying to explain the meaning of total commitment to God. Many people struggle to understand what total commitment is, yet it is quite simple. If I commit myself to something, I give myself totally to it. If I commit myself totally in marriage, I give myself totally to my wife. My possessions are hers; my whole person is hers; I live my life in consideration of her.

If I commit myself totally to God, all that I have is His: my jacket, my watch, my life. My abilities, modest though they are, are His too. Is there anything difficult to understand about this?

Similarly, if I try to explain the meaning of dying, I immediately run into a difficulty: I don’t quite see the problem. What is so hard to understand about it?

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<sup>2</sup> “All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death” (Rom.6:3); “he who has died is freed from sin” (Rom.6:7); “you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col.3:3); “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn.12:24).



Difficult questions arise when death is discussed as an existential reality confronting human beings, questions such as: Why is death a reality in human experience? Why do people have to die? What is its ultimate cause (as distinct from its immediate causes, such as sickness)? Is death caused by sin? Is death final? Is it like a tunnel through which everyone must pass? But these are not the questions we are discussing here.

What concerns us is specifically death to sin as the way by which we enter into new life in Christ. This supplies the answers to the questions about death put forward in the previous paragraph. But we will not discuss this matter on the theoretical level.

What then is dying? Basically, *dying to sin means to finish with the old way of life*. In forsaking it completely, we put an end to that old lifestyle. In the Old Testament, “cut off” is a striking way of describing how one’s life is terminated (e.g., Ex.9:15). Dying with Christ cuts our attachment to our old lifestyle once and for all.

## **Death described as “sleep”**

Before we proceed to the biblical teaching, let me use another analogy to explain the meaning of death. The Bible often compares death to sleep, as in “the sleep of death” (Psalm 13:3; cf. Jn.11:11,13; 1Cor. 11:30; 15:6,18,51).

I am using this analogy because it is easier for us to understand sleeping than dying. If someone should ask you

to explain what sleeping is, you might say, “It’s simple. Sleep is sleep. What more can I say? I lie down, close my eyes, take a few breaths—and sleep.”

Some people make us envious. They lie down, and fall asleep in a few minutes. Others toss and turn for an hour and are still awake. Even if someone explains to them the mechanism of sleep, they are still unable to sleep. What is the point of listening to a lecture on sleep if in the end sleep still eludes us? We try every technique of falling asleep, yet nothing seems to work.

When God called me to Himself, He said, “Take up your cross and finish with the old life.” I said, “All right, my old life is finished. I hand myself over to You.” When Jesus said “Follow me” to Peter and Andrew, they *immediately* left their nets and followed him. When Jesus saw James and John, “he called them, and they *immediately* ... followed him” (Mt.4:19-22).

Their response to the call was immediate, a total and spontaneous response that sprang from glad obedience. They were not hindered by a divided will—theirs against God’s—but left their way of life, and followed Jesus.

This does not rule out a preparatory period before they made their response. They must have seen or heard of Jesus prior to his calling them, and knew of his person and his message, which they considered carefully and prayerfully. An immediate response does not mean a blind response, but one that comes from seeing “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Cor.4:6).

As for the question *What is dying?*, all I can say is: “Dying is dying. What more can I say?” This tautological reply is similar to that which we may get if we asked someone, “What is sleep?” He will find himself obliged to say, “Sleeping is sleeping. I lie down, and in ten seconds I am fast asleep.”

Our simple question turns out to be hard to answer. We might try to explain sleep scientifically in terms of electric currents that flow in the brain. Then someone suggests, “Try hot milk because milk is rich in amino acids, especially tryptophan which promotes sleep.” You gulp down lots of milk but the indigestion keeps you awake!

Is there any other solution? There are many books on sleeping. I have read on the techniques of sleep but they do not work for me. In theory I know a lot about sleep, but in practice there is a problem, as in the case of people who struggle to understand what dying to sin is.

## **Sleep gives strength and vigor**

Those who have died to sin have a spiritual vigor and inner power that others lack. Using the analogy of sleep, it is often the case that those with sleeping problems lack the physical vigor of those who sleep well.

More than that, those who have died with Christ have wonderful spiritual experiences and can testify of what God has done for them. This causes others to say, “What about

me? I never experience what these people are talking about. God does wonderful things for them but not for me.”

There is a parallel between sleeping and dying. By understanding the one, we gain a better understanding of the other. If you have no problem sleeping, you should have no problem dying if you apply the analogy to your life.

### **Commitment to die**

A commitment to sleep is vital to being able to asleep. Part of my problem is that I am not committed to sleep. When I lie down, my mind would be thinking about many things. I would turn on the lamp and jot down notes. I was preoccupied with many things, so sleep was given a low priority. But I noticed something remarkable: When I have to get up for a meeting, I commit myself to sleeping, and I sleep well.

Analogously, some have difficulty in dying to the old life. The root problem is that you are unwilling to die. If you examine your heart honestly, you will see that you are not really committed to die. You know the importance of dying because it pertains to your salvation and the new life in Christ, but after counting the cost, you are unwilling.

This leads to another parallel between death and sleep: Does sleep depend on something I do, or is it something that happens to me? Sleep is mysterious. You commit yourself over to sleep, and it suddenly takes over. You take the first step, then sleep comes upon you. So when you commit yourself to die with Christ, death will come upon you.

## **Sleep is hindered by a bad environment**

When we go camping we may be willing to sleep, but the cold night keeps us awake. Or if you camp in a hot country, the heat keeps you awake. Noise is another thing that interferes with our sleep. Opposite our home lives a young man who likes the “Boom! Boom!” type of music which has disturbed my sleep many times.

We see a parallel here. Many want to die to the old life, but are prevented by the cold of rejection, by the thought of people rejecting you. Your family rejects you, your friends reject you, your colleagues reject you. Who wants to be left out in the cold?

Or the problem of the heat. Jesus compares heat to persecution (Mt.13:6, cf. v.21). The heat of the sun beats down on you. You want to commit your life to God but are afraid of hardship and persecution. You dare not finish with the old way of life and live the new one.

Then there is the noise and distractions of the world. People in Hong Kong are familiar with noise. In Hong Kong I have to plug my ears just to get some sleep from the noise of barking dogs, construction work, and shouting on the streets. Someone has verified with a noise meter that Hong Kong is one of the noisiest cities in the world.

The world is clamoring for our attention even with neon lights. At a hotel where I stayed, there was a neon sign outside the window. It went on and off, on and off, red and green, red and blue. Some hotels have curtains so thin that they are practically useless. The wall is flashing, the ceiling is

flashing. More than that, the material world urges you to buy and buy, offering nice watches, cameras, music players, food, and jewelry. How can you die to the old way of life?

Having considered bad environments, what about good environments? At our church camp at beautiful Lake Magog in Canada, some people slept well because of the fresh air. A comfortable environment creates the opposite problem: struggling to keep awake in the daytime during the meetings! Analogously, material prosperity can be detrimental to spiritual well-being. In a dead or complacent spiritual environment—but which encourages a life dominated by the flesh—it is hard to die to the old life. If Christians and even church leaders around us are worldly, then dying to the world would be all the more difficult for us.

### **Freedom from sin**

Paul says: “Our old man is crucified with [Christ] that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin” (Rom.6:6-7, KJV). In that whole chapter, Romans 6, Paul explains the meaning of baptism and its consequence: freedom from the dominion of sin.

Paul’s concerns are practical, so our concern must also be with the practical Christian life. Many academic books on Romans leave us with the impression that this letter is a grand excursion into the heights of a theology that is out of

touch with daily life. In actual fact, Romans is most relevant to daily living.

Paul says that “our old man was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be destroyed”. Here “old man” is a literal translation of the Greek *palaios anthrōpos* (παλαιὸς ἄνθρωπος, rendered “old self” in some Bibles). As for the term “body of sin,” the genitive here depicts the body as controlled by sin. It is this body that is “destroyed” at baptism. When we are united with Christ at baptism, the body of sin—the body controlled by sin—is “destroyed”.

You might retort, “But my body is still around!” This is not what “destroyed” means here. In studying the Bible, it is important to work with the original languages. Here the English “destroyed” is misleading, but we cannot blame the translators for this because there is no exact English equivalent of the Greek word. Several mainstream Bibles render it as “done away with,” but this does not clear up the confusion. Our bodies do not disappear at baptism. What then does “destroyed” mean?

### **“Destroyed” means neutralized**

The Greek word *katargeō* (καταργέω) is derived from two words, *kata* and *argos* (ἀργός, “idle, ineffective, useless”). *Argos* in turn comes from *ergon* (ἔργον, “work, deed, action”) combined with the privative ‘*a*’ prefix. The privative negates

or reverses the meaning, so *argos* refers to something that does not work—idle, lazy, not functioning.<sup>3</sup>

It reminds us of devices that look impressive but break easily. When quartz watches first came out, I bought a relatively cheap one. They were supposed to be accurate, but the one I bought gained several minutes a day, and stopped working after two weeks. This can be described as *argos*; it quit working; it was non-functional.

Correspondingly, *katargeō* means to render something idle, useless, unemployed, non-functional. In military terms, it means to neutralize or to put the enemy out of action. The neutralized enemy may still be around but is no longer a threat.

You can appreciate how hard it is to translate this Greek word. If you looked up this word in a concordance, you would see that it is translated in various ways, depending on the context. Some Greek words are genuinely difficult to translate. Unfortunately, when a Bible translation says that the body of sin is “destroyed,” it confuses more than it

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<sup>3</sup> The meaning of Greek words cannot always be derived from their etymology or compound structure. Etymological derivations are not always accurate in defining the full scope of a word’s meaning. *Katargeō*, apart from the definition “made ineffective, powerless, idle,” has other definitions, “abolish, wipe out, bring to an end, be estranged from” (Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Lexicon of the New Testament*). These are applicable in other places in the NT. A word would often in the course of time acquire wider meaning than it may originally have had. But in *this* particular instance, understanding its etymology is helpful.



explains. Several modern translations of Romans 6:6 have “done away with,” which is scarcely any more illuminating.

What Paul is saying is that the body of sin has been *neutralized*. It is no longer the dominant power in our spiritual lives. This is the result of God’s work in our lives, by which our old man is consigned to death. The old man is still around, as also the body formerly controlled by sin, but it is no longer the controlling element in our spiritual lives. That is the good news of Romans 6.

The same Greek word is used in Hebrews 2:14 to say that Jesus was manifested to “destroy” (KJV, RSV) or, better still, to “render powerless” (NASB) the devil. In what sense has the devil been destroyed? Isn’t he still around? We know well that Satan is still active and has not been put out of existence, but his power has been curtailed. And the day will come when he will be totally neutralized (Rev.20:10).

Paul uses the same word *katargeō* in 2Timothy 1:10 to say that Christ “abolished” death. This is the translation given in most of the major versions, except NIV which has “destroyed”. But death is still a reality. One of my friends died just the other day. Paul doesn’t mean that death has been abolished out of existence, but that death, for the Christian, has been neutralized. It no longer has power over the Christian because death, for him or her, is not the final chapter.

Similarly, the devil has been destroyed, not in the sense of being wiped out of existence, but of no longer being able to control and to destroy *those who abide in Christ*. Neither

is death a threat if we abide in Christ, though physical death is still a reality. The day is coming when death will indeed be completely eliminated (Rev.20:14).

To use an analogy, at various times outbreaks of cholera or the bubonic plague have wiped out large segments of humanity. When a plague strikes, thousands upon thousands can perish in a short time. But through improved medical knowledge and practice, cholera and the bubonic plague have been neutralized (*katargeō*) today, just as death has been neutralized for the Christian who is in fellowship with God.

It doesn't mean that these germs or viruses have been eliminated, but that they have been neutralized, that is, their power to destroy us has been rendered ineffective, and is no longer a threat to humankind provided we take the proper precautions. Similarly, although the body of sin is still around, it is no longer a threat to me provided I take the right precautions (abide in Christ).

Cholera and bubonic microorganisms can still kill an unprotected person who comes into contact with them. Those who handle them in research laboratories must take protective measures because these biological agents are just as active and lethal as they have always been.

Likewise, if we play around with sin, Satan can destroy us just as effectively as before. Yes, the body of sin may have been neutralized, freeing us from sin's control. But if we return to sin, it will destroy us as surely as it did before. Sin will have no more power over us *only* if we abide in Christ.

That is the good news of Romans 6:6. This good news becomes a reality in us when we commit ourselves to God by an act of faith in baptism. Total commitment is the act and expression of faith.<sup>4</sup> Entering into baptism is a step of faith, so baptism without faith is an external ritual without spiritual significance.

When we take the step of faith by committing ourselves—consigning ourselves—over to dying with Christ in baptism, the body of sin is neutralized by God’s power in Christ. We can experience this dying to sin and this freedom from sin as surely as in the case of refreshing sleep coming upon us.

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<sup>4</sup>The understanding of faith as total commitment is well known to New Testament scholarship. *Zondervan Bible Dictionary*, article “Faith”: “Faith is not to be confused with a mere intellectual assent to the doctrinal teachings of Christianity, though that is obviously necessary. It includes a radical and total commitment to Christ as the Lord of one’s life”. *Dictionary of the Bible* (John McKenzie, S.J.), article “Faith” (p.268): “The scope of the faith demanded by Isaiah shows that faith was a total commitment to Yahweh, a renunciation of secular and material resources, a seeking of security in the saving will of God alone.” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* begins the article “Faith” as follows: “Faith—a belief in or confident attitude toward God, involving commitment to His will for one’s life.” See also *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, article “Faith, Faithfulness,” subarticle “Faith as assent and commitment” (vol.2, pp.416-417).

## **Freedom from sin is a reality**

The next chapter, Romans 7, goes on to talk about the power of sin. In verses 15-16 Paul describes his former predicament: The good he wanted to do, he could not; the evil he didn't want to do, he found himself doing. We sympathize with his experience. In the past, even if you didn't want to indulge in lustful thoughts, you couldn't resist their power. You didn't want to hate, yet you hated a certain person.

But Paul says we are no longer at the mercy of sin. James 4:7 says that we have the power to resist the devil, who will flee from us. Satan may be far more powerful than you or me, yet he will flee from us when we resist him. We have the power to resist him and to resist sin, being free from their control.

Is that your present experience? I say "present" because Romans 6 is talking about a present experience: "For he who has died is freed from sin" (v.7). The body of sin is neutralized now, not just at some point in the future. At baptism we commit ourselves to death—death to the old self—and we finish with the old way of life here and now.

In the past we conformed to the bleak picture in Romans 7: we could not resist sin. But thanks be to God, Romans 8:2 says, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."

The principle of life in Christ Jesus has defeated the principle of sin and death in you. You have been freed because one power overcame the other. In Christ, life

overcame death. The power of sin is great, yet you have been freed by the greater power of life in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

I now can resist sin because it is no longer the boss of my life. Romans 6:12 says, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts.” Note the significant word “let”. Previously you had no choice but to sin because sin controlled you. You tried to resist sin but your efforts were futile, for sin was too powerful. But now you have the power of choice—the power to “let”. You are now free to choose not to “let sin reign in your mortal body”.

But if you continue to let sin reign in your life, death will certainly await you. As Paul warns the *Christians* in Rome, “For the mind set on the flesh is death”. He then tells them that “the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace” (8:6). We can choose the one or the other, the flesh or the Spirit, death or life. We previously had no choice because sin controlled us, but now we can choose not to be a slave to sin.

Romans 6:14 says, “Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.” In the Old Covenant, the Holy Spirit was not available to everyone as a gift from God. The Holy Spirit is the sign and the seal of the New Covenant, not the Old. Under the law, sin had dominion over people. Though we knew the commandments, we could not keep them, for sin was too powerful. The law made it clear that all human beings, even the most religious of them, are under the dominion of sin. But now sin has lost its control over those who are in Christ.

Romans 6:18 says, “Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” Verse 22 explains the consequence of this freedom: “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (NIV). What is the outcome of a life that has been freed from sin and is progressing in holiness? *Eternal life*.

It is crucial to be freed from the power of sin. It is not a take-it-or-leave-it matter, for it has to do with our *salvation*. Freedom from sin is crucial because the end of the narrow road is eternal life. Those who have not been freed from sin will walk on the broad road that leads to destruction.

## **At baptism we walk to our burial**

Just as we commit ourselves over to sleep amidst the noise and distraction, so we commit and consign ourselves over to be united with Christ, to be “baptized into his death” (Rom. 6:3) and “buried with him through baptism ... so that we might walk in newness of life” (v.4).

That decision is ours to make. The one who is about to receive baptism is *walking to his own burial*, which is remarkable because people are usually carried to their burials. And we don’t drag people to baptism kicking and shouting, burying them against their will. No, each person must make the choice to walk into the water to be buried with Christ.

If we give ourselves to God without reserve, the other part is passive: death comes over us like a wave. The billows come

over us, to use an Old Testament picture (Jonah 2:3). The waters of baptism will sweep away the old way of life, as did the flood waters in Noah's time (1Peter 3:20,21), so that in Christ (like the ark) we are brought to a new life. It is something that God does in us, not something we do to ourselves.

### **Man: Body and spirit**

Romans 6:6 speaks of the "old man". How do we understand the constitution of man? The Bible speaks of man as having two parts: body and spirit.

We won't go into a theological discussion on man's constitution, whether it is a dichotomy or a trichotomy (that is, made up of two parts or three). Those who are interested can refer to the Appended Note at the end of this chapter.

In Scripture, man basically consists of two parts: the spiritual and the physical. For example, Matthew 26:41 says, "The *spirit* is willing, but the *flesh* is weak." Here the spirit, being weak, is overpowered by the flesh. If the spirit is to triumph, the flesh must be neutralized or depleted of its power over us.

Romans 8:10 also speaks of body and spirit: "If Christ is in you, though the *body* is dead because of sin, yet the *spirit* is alive because of righteousness." But is your body literally dead? No, it is very much alive and possibly still in good health. But I think you understand the point. The body has been consigned to death in order to destroy sin in the body,

thereby removing its power. As a result, “the spirit is alive because of righteousness”. The “spirit” in this verse is the human spirit. If our spirit is indeed alive, it will function in intimate harmony with God’s Holy Spirit.

Paul’s words in Romans 8:13 can now be fully implemented: “If by the Spirit (God’s Spirit) you (your human spirit) are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live”. But how can the deeds or activities of the body be “put to death” when the body which is capable of producing those activities remains functional? Clearly “the deeds of the body” can only be neutralized when “the body of sin” is rendered non-functional through the power of the indwelling Spirit.

When sin’s control over the body is broken, with its power neutralized, the liberated body can now serve effectively as the “temple of the Holy Spirit” or the “temple of God” (1Cor.6:19; 3:16). Though the flesh has the innate tendency to fight against the Spirit, the body in which the deeds of the flesh have been neutralized can become an effective instrument of righteousness.

But we must not overlook that the words in Romans 8:13 are addressed to “you”. Your *spirit* plays a vital role in yielding itself (yourself) to God’s lordship and in consigning the deeds of the body to death. You (your spirit) are called to an active role in this commitment.



## Emptying ourselves—being poured out

Here we can learn from Philippians 2. The committing of our spirit to God is parallel to Jesus' *self-giving* commitment, who “emptied himself” (Phil.2:7). *Christ emptied himself*. He expressed it concretely by becoming a servant and humbling himself, being “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (v.8). This mind of Christ has its counterpart in us when we likewise consign our body over to death in pouring ourselves out for him.

We are freed from sin when we commit ourselves, both body and spirit, in sacrificial self-denial, in following the Lord Jesus (a common theme in the gospels). When Jesus emptied himself, he gave himself for our salvation. Likewise, when we empty ourselves, we give ourselves for the salvation of others. We now see discipleship in its true light.

Paul too emptied himself. In the same chapter he says, “Even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all” (Phil.2:17).

Paul is a vessel from which his life is poured out. The vessel is his body, which contains his life offered as a sacrificial offering, poured out like the Old Testament drink offerings. He is saying, “If my life and my blood are poured out for you, I rejoice.” Paul emptied himself to serve God's people, imitating his Lord who came not to be served, but “to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mt.20:28).

If we want freedom from sin, will we not also want freedom from its power? Formerly, as slaves of sin we had no

choice but to sin. But now we are free from the power of sin and have the freedom of choice.

Do we regard the price of becoming a new person in Christ as being too high? Do we think that remaining under the bondage to sin will result in a lesser cost to us? Is pouring ourselves out as a sacrifice to God for the blessing of others, and as a thank offering to Christ “who loved me and delivered himself up for me” (Gal.2:20) far more than what we are willing to give?

When we speak of “faith” are we talking about the same thing as Paul in Philippians 2:17 where he speaks of “the sacrifice and service of your faith”? May God grant us a living, dynamic and functional faith that expresses itself in “the sacrifice and service of faith”.

## AN APPENDED NOTE

### The “inner man” and the “outer man”

Does Scripture speak of man as having two parts or three? This question is often debated. We need not be rigid or dogmatic when considering this question, but we need to look at the Biblical evidence with an open heart and mind.

Paul says, “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our *outer man* is decaying, yet our *inner man* is being renewed day by day.” (2Cor.4:16). Paul speaks of man in terms of “outer” (the body or the “flesh”) and “inner” (the spirit). He refers to the “inner man” also in Romans 7:22 and Ephesians 3:16; hence the use of this term in Second Corinthians is by no means an isolated case.

He draws a parallel contrast between the “flesh” and the “spirit” of man, as in 1Cor.5:5 and 2Cor.7:1. This is in harmony with the Lord’s teaching: “Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the *spirit* is willing, but the *flesh* is weak” (Mt.26:41; Mk.14:38).

The contrast of flesh and spirit in these words of Jesus finds a parallel in Romans 7:15-25 where in vv.22,23 we read, “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the *inner man* [the spirit, in contrast to the outer man, the body], but I see a different law in the members of my *body*, waging war against the law of *my mind*”.

From this it is clear that the “mind” is a faculty of the “inner man” (or spirit) which is “willing” (Mt.26:41) and “joyfully concurs” (Rom. 7:22) with God’s law. The mind can serve the law of God while the flesh serves the law of sin (v.25). It would be erroneous to speak of “spirit, *mind*, and body” *if* in doing so one intends to state that these are *equal* parts that together constitute man.

The Holy Spirit works alongside man’s spirit in its battle with the flesh, which is why the contrast and the conflict between flesh and Spirit is often mentioned (Rom.8:4,5,6, 9,13; Gal.3:3; 4:29; 5:16,17; 6:8; Phil.3:3).

From the foregoing Biblical evidence, it clearly emerges that man is generally spoken of in terms of “inner” and “outer,” or of “spirit” (strengthened by the Holy Spirit) and “flesh”. That is to say, man is spoken of in terms of a dichotomy.

## The meaning of *psychē*

There are some who teach that man is a trichotomy (having three parts, body, soul, spirit). This notion is based mainly on one verse, 1Thess. 5:23, and derives from an inadequate understanding of the Biblical meaning of the word translated “soul” (Greek ψυχή, *psychē*). A major problem is that the meaning of the word “soul” is exceedingly imprecise and is consequently understood in a variety of ways. Here is a selection of the main definitions given in *Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

1. The immaterial part of man. 2. Moral and emotional part of man. 3. Intellectual part of man. 4. Animating or essential part (of person). 5. Person viewed as embodying moral or intellectual qualities. 6. Emotional or intellectual energy. 7. Personification or pattern (of a quality in a person, such as honor). 8. Departed spirit.<sup>5</sup>

We often get a general but imprecise idea of the meaning of a word from its context or from the way it is used, but frequently this cannot be done, as in the case of 1Thess.5:23.

Which of these meanings do we choose if we use the word “soul”? Given all these possible meanings of “soul,” the word is virtually unusable for conveying a precise meaning. Why insist on a trichotomy in man when a major constituent in it is too vague to make any real sense? Some Christians, in an attempt to make sense of the word, provide a definition (such as *mind* or *intellect*) based upon very inadequate exegesis of Scripture.

To understand what Paul means by *psychē* (soul) in 1Th. 5:23, we need to look at the way he generally uses the word. We will then see that the way he uses the word is in line with the way it is used in the New Testament as a whole.

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<sup>5</sup> Hence it comes as no surprise that few readers of the Bible have much idea what “soul” really means. Notwithstanding this, the word occurs frequently in some English Bible versions, though its frequency seems to decline according to how recent the versions are. The occurrences of “soul” in some of the major versions are as follows: KJV, 458 times; NASB, 278 times; NRSV, 208; NIV, 129 times. The number for NIV is less than a third of that for KJV.

Paul uses *psychē* in three main categories of meaning: (1) A living “person” (*psychē* never refers to a dead person), for example, “let every *person* be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom.13:1; also 2:9; 1Cor.15:45; etc); (2) the “heart” as the central element of a living person (Phil.1:27; Eph.6:6; Col.3:23); (3) the physical life, as in Phil.2:30 where it refers to Epaphroditus (v.25) who, for the sake of Christ, risked his *life*; so also in Rom.11:3; 16:4.

From this we see that *psychē* is at times used with an emphasis on the *inner life* (the “heart and mind”), though without losing sight of the whole person as its context. At other times it is used with an emphasis on the *outer life* (the physical life), again without losing sight of the whole person. But frequently it has reference to *both* the inner life and the outer life, thus referring to the person *as a whole*. The central element in every instance is the *life* of the person.

This harmonizes perfectly with the meaning of *psychē* in the New Testament as a whole, where its basic definition <sup>6</sup> as referring to a person’s “life” stands out clearly. It is worth noting, by way of contrast, that the word “life” does not appear at all in the definitions of “soul” provided by *Concise*

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<sup>6</sup> The following are the section headings under *psychē* (ψυχή) in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, by Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich: “1. Life on earth in its animating aspect making bodily function possible: a. (breath of) life, life-principle, soul; b. earthly life, life (itself); c. that which possesses life/soul; 2. Seat and center of the inner human life in its many and varied aspects, soul; 3. An entity with personhood, person.” Notice that *life* is central to all these definitions.

*Oxford Dictionary* quoted above. Anyone who tries to understand the Bible by relying solely on a standard dictionary may find himself in the dark.

If *psychē* in the New Testament essentially means *life*, then 1Thess. 5:23 fits in exactly with the Old Testament teaching that *it is man's life that holds his spirit and body together*. It means that when a man dies, body and spirit separate. Ecclesiastes 12:7 explains what happens in death: "The dust (the body, Gen.2:7; 3:19) will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it". This explains why the word *psychē* stands *between* "spirit" and "body" in 1Thess.5:23. Because *psychē* is that which holds spirit and body together, it can refer to a person as a whole.

Since *psychē* comprehends both the inner and outer aspects of man, it is not surprising that it is used frequently to refer to the *salvation of the person as a whole* (Mt.16:25; Mk.8:35; Lk.9:24; Jas.1:21; 5:20; Heb.6:19; 10:39; 1Pet. 1:9,22; 2:25; 3:20; 4:19; etc).

Because *psychē* holds together the spirit and the body, the saving of one's *life* necessarily means the saving of both the spirit (1Cor.5:5) and the body (Phil.3:21) in which this life exists and functions. Life, then, is not a third element independent of spirit and body but is, in its very nature, integral to both spirit and body in a living person. Salvation in Christ embraces the whole person.

Finally, it makes no more exegetical sense to argue that 1Thessalonians 5:23 proves that man is composed of three parts than to argue from Luke 10:27 and Mark 12:30 that

man is composed of four parts: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *mind*, and with all your *strength*” (cf. Dt.6:4-5).

New Jerusalem Bible correctly translates 1Thess.5:23 as follows, “May the God of peace make you perfect and holy; and may *your spirit, life and body* be kept blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”




## Chapter 2



# DEATH: BID GOODBYE TO SELF AND THE WORLD

### **Are you alive or dead?**

o we feel that this is a strange question to ask? Let us then consider the Lord's words to the Christians in Sardis, "You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Rev.3:1). These Christians evidently supposed themselves to be alive, and even had the reputation of being alive, yet were told that they were dead and spiritually non-functional.

To be alive to the world and to pursue the things of the world is to be spiritually dead. Conversely, to be alive to God is to be dead to the things of the world. We either die to the world or die to God. This is the most important decision we will ever make. Any attempt at a compromise between the two will result in disaster.

Many Christians are so weak that they don't know whether they are dead or alive: "Have I truly died to sin? At

baptism I was supposed to have died with Christ, yet my subsequent conduct indicates that I have not. Maybe it was a partial death.” But anyone who hasn’t died completely is still not dead. If you aren’t dead, how can you have the new life in Christ?

There are Christians who claim to be totally committed to God but are unsure of their commitment. Every time they sin, they begin to wonder all over again, “Am I really saved?” Some Christians carry on like this for decades until it finally dawns on them that they are not true Christians after all. The old self has never died, and there has never been a true commitment to God. So they live from day to day without that assurance which only the Holy Spirit can give, namely, the assurance that we are God’s children (Romans 8:16).

### **A partial “goodbye” even in full-time service**

*The part can be the enemy of the whole*, that is, you may be committed in one area and assume that your commitment in that area represents the whole. This assumption is a serious error, particularly in the case of those who are serving God full time in the full-time ministry.

A person may give up his job and his profession to serve the Lord. In giving up his profession, he thinks that he has concretely expressed his *total* commitment. What he has done is undeniably a form of commitment, but is it total? Giving up a job or career is undeniably a big step to take. But what if in giving up our careers, we don’t give up our

old stubbornness, bad temper, or self-centeredness? What is the point of giving up our jobs if we retain our selfishness and nastiness?

In giving up a career to serve God, we have indeed given up something very important. But important as it is, it represents only one part of our lives. What is the most centrally important thing to us? Undoubtedly, it is our self, our ego, the big “I” or “number one”. But have we given up what truly matters in our relationship with God? That is what I mean by the part being the enemy of the whole.

Giving up our careers does not mean that we have truly given up everything *if* the most important part—the self—has not been given up. If that is the case, then we still haven’t said goodbye to our old attitudes or forsaken our selfish pursuits. The tragic result of all this is that we enter into the Lord’s work with basically the same inward attitude and self-centeredness that we had before. The consequences of this for the church are lamentable.

Many become Christians or go into full-time service in search of something. Many seek an inner satisfaction that is deeper than what their secular professions can give them. And they are not wrong in that understanding. Serving God does give you a satisfaction that no other profession on earth can give. When you serve God wholeheartedly, when you see people coming to God, when you see transformed lives and the power of God’s word in people’s hearts, you gain a deep satisfaction of a kind that no secular profession can give you even with its financial rewards.

Therein also lies the danger. You may go into the Lord's work in search of inner satisfaction. This is not wrong in itself because we are not to serve God without joy or satisfaction. But if you have gone into the Lord's work without having abandoned your old mentality with self-satisfaction as its primary motivating force, it indicates that the *self* remains at the center of your life. You are still driven by the desire to please yourself rather than the Lord in all that you do.

As a result, some preachers and Christian workers exhibit behavior that is far below the Biblical standard. When others see their conduct, they get a nasty shock. You may very well have witnessed this kind of thing yourself.

I recently talked with a pastor of a Chinese church in New Jersey, USA. This Chinese pastor used to be a research biochemist with a doctorate in biochemistry. He gave up his profession to serve the Lord. He told me of a pastors' meeting that he had attended. Having been in the ministry for only one year at the time, he needed to have his eyes opened in a rather painful way. He was shocked at the way many of the pastors and Christian workers behaved at the meeting which was closed to outsiders and lay people. He was staggered by the rude and unloving way they spoke to one another, and the way they insisted on their own opinions. When he could not endure it anymore, he stood up and spoke out, "I am ashamed to be in your midst today. Your conduct is a disgrace to the gospel."

## **Making a commitment without forsaking the old self**

Why do some full-time Christian workers behave like that? Yes, they did leave their professions behind in some kind of commitment; but no, they didn't say goodbye to their old thinking and attitudes. Their old ego or "self" is the one possession they hadn't let go of. So they brought all this along with them into the ministry, bringing disgrace and possibly disaster to the church.

We too may have made a commitment to God at baptism. We may have said, "Lord, I put my life into Your hands." But then we bring along our old habits, our old behavior, our critical attitude, into the Christian life and the church. We bring all these old things into the "new" life, producing a contradiction within ourselves. Some Christians are a living embodiment of contradiction, and before long they begin to wonder if they are dead or alive.

Do you know if you are dead or alive? Can you say without being self-deceived, "I am alive right now. I am confident that by God's grace I am alive and not dead"?

Or will you admit that you don't know whether you are dead or alive? Is it possible to make a commitment and not know it? Is it possible for someone to go into baptism, to be united with Christ in death, and then come out and say, "I don't know if I'm dead or alive"? If a dead man doesn't know he is dead, that is not surprising, for a dead person knows nothing. But if someone who is alive doesn't know if he is dead or alive, that really is a problem!

## **Is death instantaneous or progressive?**

This leads to other questions: Is sanctification (being holy or becoming holy) instantaneous or progressive? Is the Christian life a gradual process of dying, or is it a process of growing and living? Or is it a combination of the two: half the time we are dying, half the time we are living? Or could it be that, paradoxically, we live as we die, and die as we live? The whole thing is becoming incomprehensible.

Is it a matter of making a slow, gradual commitment to . . . die? If so, the Christian life would be progressive dying. Since we are not perfectly sinless, this leads us to think that we die to sin in a slow process that goes on through the Christian life. Yet in our daily struggles, we get the nagging feeling that we could be wrong, because the Lord did say, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). In reality we are more familiar with abundant death than abundant life!

## **Whoever does not renounce all cannot be my disciple**

To address these issues, let us turn to the ultimate authority, that of Jesus himself, and listen to his own words. But you may ask, “Where did the Lord teach these things?” Well, in several places, but let us first concentrate on Luke 14:33: “Therefore, no one of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.” To get the context, let us read from verse 25:

Now great multitudes were going along with him; and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace. So therefore, no one of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.”

### **Costly grace versus cheap grace**

The absoluteness of the Lord’s words disturbs us. His demands are not only high, they are absolute, total, unlimited. He tells us to say goodbye to all that we have. We cannot evade this *all-ness* because in the Bible we repeatedly find this uncomfortable “all”. God’s salvation is certainly a gift of grace, but if you accept this gift, it will cost you everything. We forsake everything to gain the pearl of great price

(Mt.13:46). Costly grace and expensive grace, that is the grace of the Bible.

Many churches preach a cheap grace: a grace that costs nothing, a grace so cheap that no year-end clearance sale can compete with it. But cheap grace bears no resemblance to what Jesus teaches. Here he uses the words “no one of you” to indicate that *no one is exempted*. The Lord is speaking not only to the apostles or “elite” Christians, but to everyone in the “great multitudes” of listeners (v.25). It is to them that he says, “No one of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions” (v.33).

We either take Jesus’ words seriously or just forget the whole matter. But if you go for a compromise, saying, “I’m going to be a moderate Christian who goes for half-measures, not a fanatical Christian who does things by all’s,” then you will never know what it is to be a true Christian or experience the abundant life that the Lord talks about.

In the long term you will in fact pay a higher price. That higher price is something you will discover for yourself: Instead of experiencing the abundant life that Jesus came to give you, you will discover that life is a continuity of death, forever death, abundant death.

To reject the Lord’s words is death. It results in a life of defeat after defeat, failure after failure, and finally death. But if we obey him, we will experience the reality of what he says in John 10:10: “I came that they might have life, and have it *abundantly*.”



If you go for half measures, or reject Jesus' statement as being too extreme, or think it is being too fanatical to follow Jesus' call with its high cost of salvation and discipleship (versus the teaching that salvation is unconditionally free), you will end up with a Christian life that is powerless, joyless, and meaningless—so much so that you might as well forget the whole thing and go back to the world. Enjoy the world while you still have the opportunity, for the alternative is worse: being miserable now and miserable at the future judgment. At least enjoy yourself now even if it leads to misery at the judgment. But to be miserable now and also at the judgment is surely to be, of all men, most foolish.

In this case, is not the worldly man smarter who says, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isa.22:13; 1Cor. 15:32)? Since death and judgment await him, he might as well enjoy himself now, even if it's only for a few decades. At least he has enjoyed himself for a short time prior to an eternity of condemnation. But that is still better than having the worst of both worlds: misery at the present time, followed by an eternity of wretchedness.

We fall easily into foolishness. The children of this age are wiser, in this respect, than those who claim to be the children of light (Lk. 16:8). It is the sons of the kingdom who are cast out because of their unbelief and disobedience (Mt.8:12). And people still ask, "How come we don't experience the abundant life that Jesus spoke about?"

## **“Renouncing all” goes beyond material possessions**

Jesus says that we cannot be his disciple unless we “give up all” our possessions (Lk.14:33). Let me stress at the outset that this is not limited to material possessions. In fact the context has little to do with material possessions. When we read “give up all your possessions,” we often think of our property, our bank account, our earthly treasures. The term “everything he has” (NIV) or “all his own possessions” (NASB) certainly includes material possessions, but not exclusively. As Paul says, you can give up all these things and even offer your body to be burned, yet not have love (1Cor.13:3) because of being *self*-centered rather than God-centered.

It is of great importance that we understand this truth: The giving up of material possessions can become a substitute for the giving up of a possession far more valuable to us, namely, our old, deeply rooted, dearly loved, self-centered way of life. The one possession dearer to us than anything else is our self, the “I”.

A careful look at Jesus’ teaching makes it clear that he is not talking exclusively, nor even primarily, about material possessions. The passage in Luke 14 says that our closest family members, whom we regard as more cherished than house or land, will have to be “hated” if they try to hinder us from following Jesus. And what does carrying our “own cross” mean but giving up even our own lives?

Take note of this, especially if you have little to lose in terms of material possessions. It is easy to give up your possessions if you have few possessions. If you have only \$100, it would be relatively easy to obey the command, “Give up all your possessions.” Likewise, giving up a job is easy if you find the job unfulfilling. Perhaps you are fed up with your boss, or with your rival who is breathing down your neck. Surrender my job? Hallelujah, take it! Take my \$100 as well! Nothing can be simpler.

But then we bring our egotism into the church, along with our conceit and critical attitude. We cannot fool God, the One whom Scripture calls the “only wise God” (Rom. 16:27), the One who alone has perfect wisdom. He looks for something far deeper than our jobs or possessions. Even if we think our job is valuable, does God value it so highly? It may be valuable to us, but hardly to Him. What is truly valuable to Him is our heart, our “inner man,” our person as a whole.

It is possible to give up your job and possessions without surrendering your heart, your self, or your whole being, to God. That happens in a great many cases. In Philippians 2:19-21 Paul was grieved to discover that among his coworkers, no one apart from Timothy was genuinely concerned for the interests of the brethren. What kind of coworkers were the others? Some had undoubtedly forsaken their material possessions to follow the Lord, yet without forsaking their selfishness. They transported their old life and their selfish interests into the new life. All that was

“new” was merely external; nothing truly new had taken place within them.

Let’s get to the root of the matter. Do we think that we are totally committed to God? That is the question. My wife Helen told me that giving up her nursing profession was easy. Giving up her material possessions was also easy; she didn’t have much anyway. But when it came to giving up the old self-centered life, that was a real problem.

Take note of what Jesus is saying: It is the one who loses his life—not just his possessions—who will find it (Mt. 16:25). He who keeps his life to himself will lose it, even if he gives up all his possessions. We cannot escape the depth and power of the Lord’s wisdom.

If you want to experience the abundant life in Christ, do not say to yourself that you are willing to give up your job. It is not your possessions and the like that matters, but your very *self*. From now on, we will live totally for God and for others. Otherwise we will not experience the victorious Christian life, but will be left with an airy-fairy ideal. We would be like an astronomer who gazes at the stars with a telescope, admiring their beauty but unable to touch them. To many, the Lord’s teaching is a beautiful object that we admire from a distance. It’s for dreamers, not for practical people like us. We congratulate ourselves for being practical Christians, while the abundance of the Spirit-filled life becomes mere talk.

## Losing everything to gain Christ?

Paul says, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil.3:8). Then he goes on to say that we too should “have this attitude” (v.15), and calls us to follow his example (v.17). Paul was inspired by this goal: to “gain Christ”. Does this goal inspire us too?

Why gain Christ? Paul has seen that everything of eternal value is found in Christ, therefore to have Christ is to have everything that is worth having. For “in him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col.2:9); “in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col.2:3). Moreover, “Christ is our life” (Col.3:4), and that covers everything including salvation, a salvation that includes regeneration, sanctification, and glorification.

To gain Christ also means to be saved, as seen in 2 Timothy 2:10: “obtain the salvation which is in Christ”. “Christ Jesus who became to us ... *redemption*” (1Cor.1:30). Salvation and redemption are found only in Christ, and are obtained when we gain Christ.

If Paul could “gain Christ” without having to suffer the loss of all things, or if he could have the abundant life without giving up everything, why would he give up everything? Wouldn't he be the greatest fool on earth for doing what is totally unnecessary? But in the end, who will prove to be the fool, we or the apostle?

## Paul's life and teaching fulfills Jesus' own teaching

What Paul did, including what he teaches in Philippians 3, fulfills Jesus' own teaching in Luke 14. Why do we quote Paul selectively, choosing the parts that suit our taste while rejecting the parts we find distasteful, and still imagine that we can be saved? Unlike Paul, we think that we can gain Christ without suffering the loss of all things, or perhaps with the loss of a few things.

That Paul gave up everything while at the same time teaching salvation by faith clearly demonstrates that he saw no contradiction between these two positions. Any perceived contradiction exists only in the minds of those Christians who have been taught a cheap grace that calls for a cheap faith. "Faith" in Paul's vocabulary is not mere intellectual assent, but a total commitment to God with the most practical and concrete implications.

Would anyone be willing to give up everything, including one's very self, to gain Christ without having *absolute faith in Christ*? The answer is obviously "no". Without such faith no one would take such a step. *It is possible only by faith.* Forsaking all to gain Christ is the clear evidence of a genuine faith. It is this kind of faith that Paul proclaims both by word and by example. It is this kind of faith that Jesus looks for in those whom he calls.

## To “forsake” is to say goodbye

Let us look at the word “forsake” as in, “Whoever of you does not *forsake* all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Lk.14:33). This word translates a common Greek word *apotassō* (ἀποτάσσω) which means “say farewell (to), take leave (of)” and also “renounce, give up” (BDAG Greek-English lexicon). It occurs in Acts 18:21 where Paul says goodbye to the Ephesians before setting sail for Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem. In all the other occurrences of this word in the New Testament, it consistently means to take leave of or to say goodbye to (Mk.6:46; Lk.9:61; Acts 18:18; 2Cor.2:13). Jesus’ statement, therefore, is more literally rendered as: “No one of you can be my disciple who does not say goodbye to all that he has”.

“Goodbye” expresses departure. You say goodbye when you are going away. When you put on your coat and open the door, you say goodbye. What is more, the context of Luke 14:33 indicates that this action is not made impulsively but only after careful deliberation as in calculating the cost of building a tower, Lk.14:28-30, or in deciding whether to engage a numerically superior force in battle, knowing that once the battle is joined there is no turning back, vv.31-32. It is a final, decisive goodbye. It is goodbye forever.

The best way to understand this is to look at Israel’s exodus out of Egypt. Many people don’t know why we need the Old Testament. Paul says that it was written for our instruction (1Cor.10:11), telling us what will happen to

those who don't live according to the Lord's teaching, or think they can water it down.

Exodus means departure. The day finally came for Yahweh God to say to Israel, "You're going to follow Me out of Egypt. You're going to say goodbye to Egypt forever, and leave everything behind." You obviously can't take along your house in the exodus. Neither can you trek through the wilderness with the dining table you inherited from your grandmother. When the Israelites left Egypt, they had to say goodbye to their little vegetable patch, even abandoning their sacks of onion and garlic. In the wilderness, they were always dreaming of the garlic they used to savor (Num. 11:5). They had to leave all these things behind, and bid them farewell.

The Lord Jesus speaks in similar terms: Say goodbye to all that you have, and leave. Saying goodbye is something active. If you don't move on, you won't have to say goodbye. But when you move on, you say goodbye. Recently a brother said goodbye to the people at his company. If he were staying on with the company, he wouldn't have to say goodbye. It is motion, a movement away from something.

Jesus is saying that unless you bid farewell to all that you have, as did the Israelites in Egypt, you cannot be his disciple. Of course the Israelites did take some things along with them. They wore clothes when they left Egypt, and took along necessities such as tents, water containers and utensils, for use in the wilderness. When Jesus tells us to leave our possessions behind, he doesn't mean that we are to



sleep on the streets and make a public nuisance of ourselves. We fall into this kind of error when we think exclusively in terms of material possessions.

The Israelites said goodbye to the old way of life in Egypt. That had to be left behind. They were leaving a life of slavery under Pharaoh, which represents the old life enslaved by sin. And leaving everything behind, they departed.

## Goodbye as signifying death

The New Testament uses the Greek word *exodos* (ἐξοδος) in two senses: the first is Israel's departure from Egypt, the other is death. The link between the two is easy to understand because we think of death as departure.

*Exodos* is used in Hebrews 11:22 of Israel's departure from Egypt, and in Luke 9:31 of the death of Jesus. In 2 Peter 1:15 it is used of the death of Christians in general, and of Peter in particular.

Its spiritual significance is this: The exodus from Egypt symbolizes our death to the world. Paul links the exodus to our being baptized into Christ when he says that the Israelites were baptized into Moses in the Red Sea when they came out of Egypt (1Cor.10:2). Only *after* they had left Egypt did God establish a covenant with them. We likewise enter the new covenant only after we have exited the old life.

Moses was God's appointed representative of the legal system of the old covenant, just as Jesus is the representative of the new covenant. Though God was the One who gave

the Law at Sinai, it is often called “the Law of Moses” in both the Old and the New Testaments. That is because Moses is its chief representative, promulgator, and spokesman. In being baptized into Moses, the people were in effect baptized into the old covenant.

1Corinthians 10:2 (“all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea”) shows a direct link between exodus and baptism. But because *exodus* also signifies death, we now have a link between death and baptism (as in Romans 6:3,4).

In verses 3 and 4, Paul extends the parallel when he says that the Israelites ate the same spiritual food (manna, cf. Jn.6:51) and drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock, which was Christ. The allusion to the communion is unmistakable.

Note the sequence: baptism first, then communion. Paul goes on to say that these things were written for our instruction (v.11).

The Israelites entered into the old covenant after they had left Egypt, and began a new life under God. Similarly, we left the old life behind; we were baptized into Christ, and entered the new life in him.

### **Have we left everything behind?**

Have we truly said farewell to the world as did the Israelites when they left Egypt? Have we ever said goodbye to the old life as they did? If not, then we are not even on the level of the Israelites. Never mind the new covenant, most

Christians are not even on the level of the old covenant. The Israelites did literally leave their old life behind in Egypt once and for all, and crossed the Red Sea. Did we even do that much when we became Christians? And what did we leave behind? In most cases, nothing. At the very least, the Israelites did leave behind most of what was dear to them.

No wonder most Christians cannot compare, in terms of spiritual power and stature, with some of the Old Testament people, never mind living up to the New Testament standards. What the New Testament says about every true Christian—that he or she is greater than that last great servant of God of the Old Testament era, John the Baptist (Mt.11:11)—is nothing but a pipe dream to many Christians. They have not abandoned anything, least of all the old ego.

And thanks to the church leaders, preachers and teachers who never stop insisting that salvation is a free gift that costs us nothing, we can dismiss Jesus' teaching as irrelevant. "Of what use to us is his teaching? Who needs it?" Yet the same people who don't listen to Jesus dare to call him "Lord". To such people Jesus will ask, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Lk.6:46).

Multitudes of Christians listen to the preachers who teach cheap grace and that discipleship is a higher level of Christianity suitable for "elite" Christians but not "ordinary" Christians like us. That is false teaching as far as the Bible is concerned. In the New Testament, *every* Christian is a disciple. "Disciple" is just another name for a

Christian. The disciples were first called “Christians” in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Every Israelite, not just Moses, that “elite” servant of God, had to leave Egypt behind. Everyone had to literally get up and go. Their mud houses may mean nothing to us, but they were precious to the Israelites because they were born and brought up in them. They cherished their tables and chairs. They said goodbye to the things they could not take along with them. Many must have wept as they looked at their homes for the last time. “My garden patch may be tiny, but it’s precious to me!” Then they left.

The Israelites abandoned everything except their clothes and some personal items needed for their journey. Everything else was left behind. Did you leave behind anything? For most Christians, the honest answer would have to be *nothing*, and for others, very little. Yet we wonder why we don’t experience the abundant Christian life.

### **God’s presence in the wilderness with His people**

Yet the wilderness is a wonderful place to be in *if God is with you*. Many think that Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness was a terrible experience, but I don’t think so. The wilderness may be a hostile place, but if God is with you, it is a wonderful place.

Was the parting of the Red Sea a terrible experience for the Israelites? No, it was a wonderful experience of God’s deliverance! You have no water to drink? He causes water to

gush out of the rock. You have no food to eat? Here come the quail and manna! In the wilderness there was a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day (Ex.13:21)—a constant, visible assurance of God's presence.

Have you ever wondered why the pillar of cloud by day became a pillar of fire by night? Why not a pillar of fire both day and night, since fire is visible also in the daytime? And why fire by night if its light is not needed when people are sleeping?

But consider this: If the column of smoke is not imagined as being a thin vertical column, but as one that has the shape of a mushroom (as that produced by a nuclear explosion), then the cloud would provide shade for God's people from the scorching heat of the desert sun at midday. At night the column of fire would provide warmth in the cold desert night. Psalm 121:5,6 says:

Yahweh is your Keeper; Yahweh is your shade (or, protection<sup>7</sup>) on your right hand (that is, just when and where you need Him). The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.

Consider also the remarkable promise in Isaiah 4:5,6 which refers to the wilderness events:

Then Yahweh will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Brown, Driver, and Briggs, 1972 ed., p.853.

glory will be a canopy. And there will be a shelter to give shade from the heat by day, and refuge and protection from the storm and the rain.

Echoes of the wilderness experience are heard also in another of the prophecies in Isaiah:

They will not hunger or thirst, neither will the scorching heat or sun strike them down; For He who has compassion on them will lead them, And will guide them to springs of water. (49:10; it was by the pillar of cloud and of fire that He led and guided the Israelites in the wilderness, Dt.1:33.)

This promise is taken up in the book of Revelation:

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes. (Rev. 7:16,17)

How wonderful it is to walk with God in the wilderness. Without God, the wilderness would be a hostile, desolate place. But if God is with us, the wilderness would be a spiritual Garden of Eden in which He walks and talks with us as He did with Adam and Eve (Gen.3:8f).

### **What went wrong in the wilderness?**

So what went wrong in the wilderness? The Israelites may have abandoned their houses and possessions, yet they took along their old nature and attitudes, their selfishness, their

complaining spirit. They ruined what could have been a wonderful journey with God in the wilderness. Their journey could have been a short one. Even a large community moving slowly could have completed the journey in much less than a year, even if they took the circuitous route around Sinai Peninsula. But they brought along their old wretched attitudes into the wilderness, turning it into a living hell.

Do we likewise bring our old nature with us into the Christian life? If we claim to have left Egypt, what is the state of our Christian life right now? Is it a wilderness or is it the abundant life? In the wilderness of this world, do we experience God's presence as to feel that we are in a Garden of Eden? Do we experience His presence, the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire?

How God looked after His people! When Israel's enemies went on the attack, God protected His people and gave them victory. When they were thirsty, He gave them water. They only had to wait a short time while He tested their faith to strengthen it.

Do we likewise fail every test that God puts us through? Do we stumble over every stone in the wilderness and fall into every ditch? Do we then complain as did the Israelites, "Why did God bring me into the wilderness?" Well, the answer is simple: God was leading the Israelites to the land of promise. But they had somehow forgotten why they were passing through the wilderness in the first place.

Many Christians complain when they run into difficulties: "Why did God bring me here?" They have

forgotten why they are in the wilderness, and where they are heading. They have lost the vision of how God can make the wilderness blossom like a garden (Isa.35:1,2).

Have you truly died? If you have, you would know it. Have you left Egypt? Have you, by God's grace, left the world controlled by sin and Satan, the Pharaoh of this world?

If you say you don't know whether you have left Egypt or not, your sanity might be questioned on the spiritual level. If an Israelite says, "I don't know whether I am in Egypt or not," surely he doesn't have his wits together. Surely he would know whether he had crossed the Red Sea or not.

I say to those who wish to be baptized: If you don't know whether or not you want to leave Egypt in your heart, please do not go through the Red Sea of baptism because if you cross it, you will discover that Egypt is also on the other side, as if Egypt's borders had been extended, for you have brought it over with you in your heart.

That is the situation of many Christians today. While they were crossing the Red Sea, Egypt somehow took over the other side. Egypt (which represents the world) seems to be forever expanding, and many Christians are forever trapped in it because in their hearts they have never left it.



## Saying goodbye to the world

Paul speaks of death, exodus and departure in *spiritual* terms, so when we speak of dying, we are speaking spiritually. We are not speaking of physical death, not even at baptism. But that doesn't make dying any less real.

In what spiritual sense have we died? The word “die” refers to the exodus by which we bade farewell to Egypt (= the world) and then crossed the Red Sea (= baptism). The old life is left behind. Paul says, “May it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal.6:14). Death means to be finished with the world.

Whether you use the picture of farewell or the picture of death, it means the same thing. Think of what happens when we die. What will happen to our job or bank account? What will death do to our marriage and family relationships? Death means farewell to all these things. At death we say goodbye to everything. Our friends may reject us for getting baptized, so it could mean saying goodbye to them too.

Before getting baptized, ponder this well: “I am about to die to the world system. I will no longer live as a member of a world system which is alienated from God and doesn't recognize His sovereignty over it. I am about to say goodbye to everything: my job, my profession, my future in this world.” In the new life in Christ we can still have jobs or use our professional skills, but now everything is governed by God.

The old way of life lived under the control of the flesh has been terminated. As a result we no longer look at anyone or anything from the perspective of the old flesh-controlled, man-centered life. This revolutionizes our relationship to everyone and everything. “From now on, we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him thus no longer” (2Cor.5:16).

Ponder Galatians 6:14 again: “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”. Do these words echo in our hearts? Multitudes of churchgoers compromise with the world, seeking to serve both God and mammon but end up doing neither. Do we see why we cannot be the Lord’s disciples unless we forsake all that we have (Lk.14:33)?

The story is told of a millionaire, a member of the Borden family of Boston, who had become a Christian. One day when he saw a beautiful luxury car, he was heard to say (with a touch of humor), “I wish I could afford one!” As a multi-millionaire he could have owned dozens such cars, but he knew he had no more possessions. He had a lot of money in the bank, but it was his no longer but the Lord’s. He knew that he could not buy a car for himself without the Lord’s approval, and the Lord was unlikely to approve of the purchase of a luxury car. This millionaire now had the important responsibility of being a steward of God’s money, which was to be used as He leads for the furtherance of the gospel and the salvation of mankind.

## Saying goodbye: a process

“Renounce” or “say goodbye” in the Greek text of Luke 14:33 is in the present tense, indicating a continuous process.<sup>8</sup> Jesus does not mean that we give away everything in one go. It is a continuing process of administering and distributing the possessions as good stewards. We say goodbye to everything we have, and dispose of it in an orderly step-by-step procedure according to God’s leading, since all that we are and have belong to Him. When the Israelites left Egypt, they too made careful preparations.

Is there something more to the use of the present tense here, which expresses “durative (linear) action”?<sup>9</sup> Another thing that we see is God’s wisdom: If I surrender everything as a one-time act, and one day I inherit a million dollars out of the blue, I may think that I have already given up everything, so Jesus’ words won’t apply to my new-found wealth, which is exempt from the “heavenly tax”. But Jesus uses the present tense, which means that the goodbye remains in effect permanently.

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<sup>8</sup> I.H. Marshall: “the disciple must be continually ready (present tense) to give up all he has got in order to follow Jesus (cf. 9:23),” in *Commentary on Luke, New International Greek Testament Commentary*, 1978, Eerdmans, on Luke 14:33.

<sup>9</sup> These are A.T Robertson’s words in *A Grammar of The Greek New Testament in The Light of Historical Research*, Broadman Press, 1934, p.879. Cf. also C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge, 1960, p.7, “The Greek Present Indicative normally denotes linear action in present time”.

In our worldly and self-centered thinking, we think of God as a heavenly tax collector who snatches every dollar from us. But His concern is simply this: What we carry with us out of Egypt will ruin us in the wilderness, hindering us from reaching the land of promise.

When I was twelve years old, I was sent to school in Geneva, Switzerland, where my father worked for about a year at the United Nations. Our class would sometimes go on long-distance hikes. The students would usually want to take along all sorts of things—cameras, flashlights, and so on—but the teacher would advise against that because what feels like one pound at the beginning is going to feel like ten pounds after several hours. And those who didn't listen to his advice had every reason to regret it afterwards. Have you ever tried carrying a full-sized camera (e.g. an SLR) on a long hike? The camera feels light at first, but after an hour the strap begins to cut into your shoulders; two hours later, it feels like five pounds. After a few more hours, you wish you had never owned a camera in your life.

That is why Jesus tells us to abandon all. Any Israelite who takes along his favorite armchair into the wilderness will soon find it a burden. On the first day, it may be tolerable. A week later, it will end up as firewood. Hebrews 12:1 tells us to put aside every encumbrance so that we may run the race that is set before us. Leave everything behind—especially the greed and covetousness that are never satisfied with any amount of possessions—for these things lead to disaster.

## So, is dying progressive or instantaneous?

Let us return to the vital question: Is dying progressive or instantaneous? Do we spend the whole Christian life dying? Do we die to one sin, then to another, then to yet another, so that the Christian life is more death than life? Or is this dying instantaneous, once and for all?

As we have seen in the last chapter, Scripture depicts man as consisting of body and spirit. This distinction is vital for understanding the nature of dying. When Paul says, “I was crucified with Christ, and the world was crucified to me” (Gal.2:20; 6:14), what actually died? Was Paul’s physical body crucified on the cross? Of course not. What then died with Christ? It was his *spirit*. Paul died with Christ on the spiritual level even while his physical body was still alive.

Is this kind of death instantaneous? Yes, assuming that we have truly said goodbye, once and for all, to the world at baptism. The crucifixion to the world (Gal.6:14) is not an ongoing process but a completed event. The perfect tense of “crucified” in the Greek text of Galatians 6:14 refers to an action completed in past time but with continuing result or effect.<sup>10</sup>

But the body of flesh is still with us; it has not yet died. As Paul says in Romans 7:25, the law of sin continues to dwell in the flesh—in the body. There you have it. The operational base of sin, which is the flesh, will remain with

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<sup>10</sup> For the meaning of the perfect in Greek, see any Greek grammar, e.g., *The Language of the New Testament*, E.V.N. Goetchius, Scribners, 1965, p.293.

us until the physical body dies. Spiritually I have died once and for all, having made my commitment to God by His grace through faith. It was a response to the work of the Holy Spirit in me. But the flesh is still with me, and sin is still in the flesh.

That is why Paul says in Romans 8:13, “If by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live”. The words “you are putting to death” translate one Greek word (*thanatoō*, θανατόω), which is in the *present* (continuous) tense. It is something that is carried out continuously. If I, by the power of the Spirit living in me, put to death the activities of the flesh working in me, I will live. But if I don’t put them to death, I will die. Colossians 3:5 accordingly says, “Put to death (an imperative in the Greek), therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry”. (NIV)

So, on the spiritual level, the death is decisive and instantaneous. But on the physical level, the body is still there, ever responsive to sin and temptation, and in constant need of being “mortified,” put to death. This is a continuing process.

Is death, then, instantaneous or progressive? On the spiritual level instantaneous. On the physical level of the body, the flesh, progressive.

## Victory over sin

If we haven't died spiritually, we wouldn't be able to win the battle against sin, for sin is lodged in our flesh, causing us to live a defeated life. But if the self has died with Christ, if our spirit is totally yielded to Christ, if it has said goodbye to the world, then the Spirit can empower us to live in *constant* victory without hindrance.

Though sin is still in the flesh, it is being put to death progressively through the Spirit, and we triumph consistently. We experience the abundant life from the Lord, and the good news of 2Cor.2:14, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in His triumph in Christ."

This tells us what being holy means. This is vital because God calls us to be holy (Eph.1:4; 1Pet.1:15; 1Thess.4:3; etc). Many still think of holiness as a mysterious sanctity, but in the New Testament, holiness means victory over sin in our lives, not the eradication of sin.

A "saint" in the New Testament sense of the word is one who, by God's redeeming power in Christ, has been set free from the guilt and power of sin.

Failure to grasp these principles has led some Holiness preachers to say erroneously that sin has been eradicated in the believer. I repeat this crucial fact: In the Christian life, holiness is not the eradication of sin. So long as we are in the body we will always have sin in us, but we can be victorious over it by God's triumphant power in Christ.

God promises us in Romans 8 and elsewhere in Scripture that we don't need to be controlled by sin. We can always

be victorious because, having died to the old life, we now walk in the newness of life through God's indwelling Spirit.

Victory involves battle. Without a battle, where is there victory? It is in the battle against sin and the flesh that we taste the reality of victory. And victory requires power. That power, let me say again, will not be ours until we fulfill the Lord's teaching and bid farewell to all that we have, not just our material possessions but, above all, our old nature and attitudes.

Some of this teaching may be hard for a non-Christian to understand. To him or her I say this: Please understand that Jesus makes no false promises. When you become a Christian, you will experience the joy and power of the Christian life as he promised, but only if you fulfill what he tells you to do: Forsake your old way of life and follow him with all your heart. Then you will enter into the fullness of the new life with Christ.



## Chapter 3



# REGENERATION AND RENEWAL

## **Many Christians lack a firm spiritual foundation**

**W**hat exactly do regeneration and renewal mean? In this chapter we consider these important topics because they have the greatest significance for our lives. We begin with Titus 3:3-7 in which their transforming power is described:

We also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by *the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit*, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by his grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Note the words “regeneration and renewal” (ESV, HCSB). We need to study these words with precision because they deal with foundational matters. It is cause for concern that the spiritual foundation of many Christians has never been properly laid. And if the foundation is weak, what will happen to the rest of the structure that is built upon it? Many Christians struggle over the basics of the Christian life, always unable to sort out the foundational things, much less enter into the deeper things of the spiritual life. We must deal with these matters to ensure that the foundation is properly laid.

There are times when I counsel people who in some cases became Christians 20 or 25 years ago, and they are still spiritually stagnant after all that time. During the counseling, they sometimes discover to their shock that they have not been true Christians after all, and that their so-called faith cannot pass the most elementary tests.

This is distressing. Our hearts go out to them because to a great extent the fault does not lie with them. Some people, despite having been brought up in Christian homes, have never had a proper foundation in the basics of the Christian life. In all sincerity they spend their lives trying to build a spiritual structure on a flimsy foundation, like building a wall on soft or sandy ground—only to see it collapse. They build another wall, and it also collapses. Even though it stands for a while, when a heavy truck rolls by, the ground shakes and the whole structure comes crashing down. It takes only a small crisis to trigger a collapse. The Christian

life cannot continue like that. Weak, defeated and frustrated Christians will not find this kind of life worth living. It is an exercise in futility to keep on rebuilding the same walls and repairing the same holes.

### **Lack of assurance**

Some people, when they become Christians, bring their temper and irritability along with them. Eventually they lose the assurance of salvation and have doubts about whether they are regenerate. The Holy Spirit does not seem to be witnessing with their spirit that they are children of God. Romans 8:16 says that true assurance comes only when God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are God's children. What defeated Christians get instead is a conviction of sin from the Holy Spirit (Jn.16:8), so they feel a lack of assurance. It is a miserable condition to be in.

The problem can be so acute that some people feel that they are not Christians at all, and request rebaptism. When asked why they got baptized in the first place, a variety of answers emerge: "The pastor asked me if I would like to get baptized since I had been attending church, and I felt that I might embarrass him if I refused"; or "My good friend was getting baptized and asked me to join him"; or "My boyfriend/girlfriend was a Christian, so I got baptized so that we could get married". These are some common answers. But later, when they start to seek God, they realize that they

were never true believers in the first place. In many such cases they request rebaptism.

Under what circumstances should one be rebaptized, if it is even necessary at all? It is a big step to take, and it puts us in the difficult position of assessing the state of a person's heart to evaluate whether rebaptism is necessary. When baptism is refused, it can leave the person in great anguish, to the extent that it may have serious consequences for his spiritual life. For this reason we dare not summarily refuse him baptism without considering his case carefully. Yet we cannot be lax or careless in permitting baptism.

Some churches do not permit rebaptism under any circumstance, usually because of their tradition. But what is the Biblical basis for this tradition? Is not a person's salvation, his spiritual life and growth, more important than our traditions?

I hope that the first two chapters have clarified what it means to die with Christ once and for all, to finish with the old life. If this matter is not settled, the Christian life will be plagued by constant doubt. One may feel fine for the time being, but what will happen a year or two down the road when he runs into problems which distress and weaken him, perhaps even causing him to backslide? The same old question will come back to haunt him: Am I really saved?

The foundation must be laid properly, or else the whole structure may have to be torn down and rebuilt. Looking back at my own life, if I had been taught foundational truths such as the importance of dying with Christ and to the old

self-centered life at baptism by faith, I would have been spared many dangerous detours. But God has been merciful, and kept me from falling. He led me on the path of truth (cf. Jn.16:13) even though I often had no one to teach me.

Nobody had taught me about total commitment, yet it was part and parcel of my Christian life right from the start. That is because total commitment was necessary for the Christians in China in the situation at that time. Almost everyone who came to the Lord in China was aware of the high cost of becoming a disciple of Jesus. Even that did not mean that every Christian was committed. There were secret Christians who kept their faith secret to avoid getting into trouble. Some became Christians to have something to hang on to in trying times, but once the difficulty was over, they no longer saw the need for God.

## Salvation and transformation

Let us return to Titus 3:5:

God saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness but in virtue of His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

This statement begins with, “God saved us”. Salvation is not a human accomplishment but something that God does. Moreover, salvation is not merely something that God does for us but something that God does in us. We tend to stress only what God did *for* us at Calvary. That understanding is good and Scriptural, but incomplete.

Salvation is not just about what God did *for* us, nor merely about believing in certain creeds. Right doctrine is only one element in salvation. Salvation is a matter of faith, which in Scripture essentially means commitment. Any faith that does not involve a *relationship* in which we give ourselves, or commit ourselves (as in marriage, e.g., 2Cor.11:2) to God in response to His love for us, is not Biblical faith.

In the Bible—but contrary to what we often hear today—salvation is not based merely on accepting certain doctrines, though that is necessary, but on the committing of ourselves wholly to God. To use an analogy, it is like a sick person committing himself or herself to the care of a physician, and not merely accepting or believing that this physician could provide the needed cure. Being born anew is not the result of merely accepting a set of doctrines, good though this may be, but is brought about by God’s power coming into our lives and *transforming* us. That is why salvation is God’s achievement, not ours.

### **Regeneration and renewal are not the same thing**

Titus 3:5 speaks of two things: “by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.” There is regeneration, then there is renewal.

These two things, regeneration and renewal, are not synonymous. We must not think that “regeneration” and “renewal” are two synonyms placed side by side, with renewal being a repetition of regeneration. They are not the

same but are in fact two successive stages of salvation. And the order cannot be reversed: The first is regeneration, the second is renewal. If we fail to distinguish the two, we will be mired in questions such as: Is salvation once for all, or is it a process? Do I die once or do I keep on dying?

Some teach that death is a gradual process in which we spend the whole Christian life dying; it is an ongoing mortification. The Christian life is viewed as a long gloomy process of death rather than the abundant life mentioned in John 10:10. If the Christian life goes from death to death rather than from life to life, we must have gotten something wrong. The failure to distinguish between regeneration and renewal has led many Christians to a wrong concept of the Christian life.

When you become a Christian, you first experience regeneration, then you go on to renewal. Renewal is a process, as we shall see. But regeneration is not an ever-continuing process any more than physical birth is an ever-continuing process. You are not constantly being born all through your life. You are born once, then you go on living and growing. That initial one-time birth is, of course, vital because without it we cannot talk about spiritual growth.

The first stage of salvation—regeneration—is once for all; but the second stage—renewal—is a continuing process of growing in the new life. Hence the question “Is salvation once for all or is it an ongoing process?” cannot be answered simplistically as some Christians do, who argue that it is one or the other. The fact is that both are true, depending on

which stage of salvation we are discussing. Tragically, many Christians don't know that in Biblical teaching, there are stages in salvation, much less know about regeneration and renewal.

How is *exodus* (departure) or death relevant to regeneration? This is something which Nicodemus could not understand. In John 3:3, Jesus said to him: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again (or born from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God"—let alone enter the kingdom. Nicodemus was puzzled: "How could a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (v.4). "How can these things be?" (v.9) Nicodemus could not make head or tail of all this; it was quite incomprehensible to him. The Lord's response was firm: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things?" (v.10).

What Nicodemus failed to understand is that there is no new birth without the termination of the old life; there is no spiritual birth from above (i.e., from God) without the cessation or death of the old earthly way of life, which is from below (i.e., purely human). It is not a matter of returning to one's mother's womb and repeating the old cycle of life. It is not a reincarnation of the old sin-dominated earthly life, but a completely new life given by God.

Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel, so Jesus expected him to have better spiritual understanding. His expectations for church leaders will likewise be high. Since we are dealing



with the same topic, that of regeneration, we too must understand what the Lord is telling us.

## Regeneration in the Greek New Testament

The “washing of regeneration” refers to baptism or the cleansing that comes through baptism. Here the Greek for “regeneration” is *palingenesia* (παλιγγενεσία) composed of *palin* (again) and *genesis* (birth). The combination basically means “new birth” or “new beginning”.<sup>11</sup> It is used twice in the New Testament, in Titus 3:5 and in Matthew 19:28 where the Lord says to his disciples:

Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (RSV)

You may be wondering where the word “regeneration” occurs in this statement. You won’t find it unless you look at the Greek text or another more literal translation. Here in RSV, “regeneration” is translated “new world”. In fact the statement could be translated, “Truly I say to you, in the regeneration (the new beginning, the new creation) when the Son of Man will sit upon his glorious throne ...” (NASB, also KJV and NKJV).

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<sup>11</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Liddell and Scott, Oxford, 1973, Re. *genesis* (γένεσις): “*origin, source, beginning ... manner of birth ...*” (bold mine).

In his letters, Paul describes the regenerate person in terms of the new creation, whereas in John, including his letters, the regenerate person is often spoken of as one who is *born of God*. Titus 3:5 is the only place where Paul uses *palingenesia* to refer to a new beginning, whether by birth or by creation. But even here Paul may still be thinking of a new creation because that is the idea that he often stresses. Thus the New Testament shows us two important and complementary ways of understanding the meaning of regeneration.

### **Regeneration: a break with the old**

A new world, a new creation, a new beginning, a new people collectively, and a new person individually—that is what regeneration and renewal are about. But we must break with the old before the new can come. If we hold on to the old, how can we become new persons? These two things are incompatible and contradictory, and cannot be held together in harmony.

In differentiating the old from the new, the Bible is not emphasizing a difference of *age* as if the difference is a matter of being old or being young or, as in the case of a car, an old model or a new model, for which there is nothing incompatible or contradictory. There is nothing inherently incompatible between an old book and a new one, if age is what we are talking about, since both provide useful information for reading. There is also nothing necessarily

incompatible between a grandfather and his grandchild in spite of their age difference. Indeed, they often get along wonderfully together. To think in terms of chronological age when hearing “old” and “new” is to miss the point.

This is not to deny that a chronological or age difference may also exist. The words “old” and “new” are correctly used also in this sense, as we shall see. But the fact that needs to be highlighted here is that the difference between old and new in this context is far more than one of age. Purely in terms of age, there is no reason why old and new cannot coexist. But in the present case, the difference lies not merely in age but in the innate character of the old and the new. They are *qualitatively* different. This is how the apostle describes it:

The first man is from the **earth**, earthy; the second man is from **heaven**. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the **earthy**, we shall also bear the image of the **heavenly**. Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1Cor.15:47-50)

How great is the difference between the old and the new? *It is the difference between heaven and earth!* Why does Paul also speak of the difference between “old” and “new” in the chronological sense? Because “*the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual.*” (1Cor.15:46) The natural or earthy comes first in terms of time; the spiritual comes later.

In human history, the “first man, Adam” came well before “the last Man,” Christ (1Cor.15:45). This qualitative difference carries an echo of the Lord’s own words,

You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. (John 8:23)

He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. (John 3:31)

The qualitative incompatibility of the old and the new leads Paul to say, “*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*” (1Cor.15:50). We now see why regeneration—becoming a new person—is absolutely essential if we hope to be saved and inherit the kingdom. We now understand the Lord’s solemn declaration,

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” (John 3:5-7)

Many Christians are muddled in their understanding of these vital matters, so they imagine that they can hold on to both the old and the new. But soon they feel themselves being torn apart, as it were, by two horses pulling in opposite directions. They are forever being pulled this way and that way. Or to change the metaphor, they find themselves being crushed between two opposing forces.

For this reason, many Christians find themselves in a miserable condition. It is a situation of their own making. The problem is that they want the new without letting go of the old, and end up in serious trouble. They ignore to their cost the Scriptural teaching that the old must pass away before the new can come (2Cor.5:17). What they have is not regeneration or a new person, but an old garment on which they try to patch a new piece of cloth (Lk.5:36-39). That garment will soon tear apart.

It is like pouring new, unfermented wine into an old wineskin that has lost its elasticity. The mixing of the old and the new will lead to disaster: the old wineskin will burst. Ignoring the Lord's warning about mixing the old and the new could lead to mental breakdown, as in some real-life cases. That is because the inner tension caused by the incompatibility of the old and the new will eventually become unbearable, with serious physical and mental consequences.

There are Christians who have broken down mentally after being torn apart by an inner struggle of conflicting loyalties. Why risk a breakdown? If you don't want to become a new person in Christ, it's better for you not to become a Christian. Go out and enjoy yourself. Ease the pressure off your mind. Avoid a spiritual and mental breakdown. What will your family and friends think about Christians and Christianity if you break down? Would anyone who sees such things in Christians still want to become a Christian?

We must make up our minds whom we will serve: God or mammon, God or ourselves. Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt.6:24). You cannot cling to both the heavenly and the earthly, the new and the old.

## **Without forsaking the old, we will live in hypocrisy**

Even worse, we become hypocrites when we compromise in trying to hold on to both the old and the new. You preserve the old in you while the new is wrapped around you like window dressing. The wolf within you is clothed in sheepskin. Such a person is a living contradiction, for what is put on the outside conceals what is inside.

Outwardly such a person may appear to be a fine and respectable Christian just as the Pharisees appeared righteous (Mt.23:25,27). This Christian looks pious and carries a worn Bible, but he does not live or function by the Word of God. He sounds very Christian but is a clanging cymbal and a noisy gong (1Cor.13:1). The church has too many hypocritical Christians. Because of such people, Christians have lost their credibility; the world no longer believes what they say.

However, few people are *deliberately* hypocritical. It would be unfair to accuse the Pharisees as a whole of deliberate hypocrisy, as scholars of Judaism have pointed out. The frightening thing about hypocrisy is that most hypocrites do not intend to be hypocrites. This in itself is a

good reason for taking careful note of the injunction to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

In many cases, probably most cases, Christians are unable to live the Christian life because the teaching which they had received was inadequate or even erroneous. They sincerely try to be Christians but lack the power, so they live in the bondage of hypocrisy.

The old self has never died, for these people have never been taught about dying with Christ and rising into newness of life with him. So they end up in the situation described in Romans 7:19: “I do not do the good I wish, but practice the very evil I do not wish.” In his early days under the Law, was Paul being insincere? Certainly not. He delighted in the Law with his mind (Rom.7:22,25), but when it came to living it, he could not.

It reminds us of Christians who admire the profundity of the Sermon on the Mount, but are powerless to fulfill it. Many have told me that they don’t understand the Sermon on the Mount. “I’ve heard it expounded but I still don’t understand it. It makes no sense to me. How can it be applied in everyday life?” We won’t understand it so long as the old self is still the dominant force in our lives.

The Sermon on the Mount talks about being slapped on the right cheek, and turning the other cheek (Mt.5:39). The old self can never tolerate the insult of a slap on the cheek. The “old man” will not turn the other cheek, but will hit back. Turning the other cheek is possible only by the

transformation that comes from being born anew. Whether we have been born again will be tested by the realities of daily life.

## **Palingenesia in extra-biblical Greek**

Let us examine how *palingenesia* (regeneration) is used in extra-biblical Greek (i.e., Greek outside the Bible) in order to establish its meaning. We must not impose our own meaning on words. Often we do need to know how a word is used outside the Bible because even though we acknowledge that the word may acquire deeper meaning in the New Testament, we cannot make a word mean whatever we like. For example, although the New Testament may enrich the meaning of the word “love,” we cannot force it to mean “hate”. Even if you arrive at a richer meaning of “love,” the word must still convey the basic idea of love as it is understood outside the Bible.

In extra-biblical Greek, *palingenesia* is used, for example, of the renovation or the renewing of the world after the flood. The flood destroyed the ancient world, and then the world was “reborn”. This was the way Philo, a Jewish scholar of the first century, used *palingenesia* to describe the regeneration of the world—the re-creation or renewal of the world—after the flood had wiped out mankind except Noah and his family. This shows again that the new comes forth after the old has been removed.



The word *palingenesia* was also used by the Stoics, followers of the Greek philosophical system of Stoicism, which taught the resurrection of the material world out of fire. They believed that fire will one day destroy this material world, a belief which is in general agreement with Scripture (2Pet.3:7,10,12). God will bring forth a newly regenerated and purified world out of the flames of this holocaust (Rev.21:1; Isa.65:17; 66:22). Total destruction is followed by *palingenesia*, regeneration. Something new emerges from the old that has been destroyed.

The word *palingenesia* is also used of resurrection, which is essentially a re-creation or a new beginning of the body after death. Some of the early church fathers understood *palingenesia* (regeneration) as being equivalent to *anastasis* (resurrection). Some take Matthew 19:28 as a reference to the resurrection, as though Jesus had said, “Truly, I say to you, *in the resurrection*, when the Son of Man shall sit upon his throne ...” This interpretation may be inadequate, but neither is it incorrect because the new world will indeed come with the resurrection.

This new world sums up the restitution and restoration of all things. Acts 3:21 talks about a future “restoration of all things” at which time death, the last enemy, will be destroyed. 2 Peter 3:10-13 says that new heavens and a new earth will emerge after the fire of God’s judgment destroys the existing world order. Verse 10 says:

The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

The old decaying world, where sin once reigned with its corrupting effect, will be utterly destroyed to make way for the new. The old must be removed so that the new can come to replace it. Therefore verse 13 says, “But according to His promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”

This is regeneration on the cosmic scale (Mt.19:28) in contrast to regeneration on the individual level (Titus 3:5). The whole world—indeed all things—will be renewed in Christ. God’s vision goes beyond the scope of the individual. We tend to limit regeneration to the individual whereas the Bible has in view regeneration, redemption and salvation for the universe as a whole. We need to let God broaden our vision to see things as He sees them.

### **Regeneration: The passing of the old and the coming of the new**

At the individual level, 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come.” Notice that “the old has passed away.” We cannot have the new without letting go of the old. We cannot be a new creation unless the old loses its grip on our lives.

If we don't grasp this truth, we will end up in the wretched situation that we mentioned earlier: caught in a bind between the old and the new, or crushed in the tension between them. The two are engaged in irreconcilable conflict. Anyone who tries to hang on to both will become their battleground.

That is not the Christian life. The old must go once for all, and the new must be established within us. Only when God is seated on His throne in the new creation established in our lives will we know His righteous government. Only then will we have a foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth in our lives now, and then on the universal scale in the age to come.

Why do we settle for a wretched Christian life when God wants to give us the very best? It is because we are unwilling to let go of the old. "No one after drinking old wine wishes for new; for he says, 'The old is good'" (Lk.5:39). The old is good because you feel at home with the old life and the old ways. It is hard to give up something you are familiar with. Not until life becomes a total misery and on the verge of breakdown will some people let go. But others are unwilling to let go even when breakdown is imminent.

Let us have some regard for the reputation of the Church and the name of the Lord whom we profess to love. What kind of Christian witness will we give people if they see nothing spiritually worthwhile in our lives? Or see the same old person they have known all along?

We will experience the washing of regeneration only when we are willing, once and for all, to finish with our old self, our old man, our old life, and our old way of thinking. Baptism comes in at this point, not before. No one should contemplate baptism if he wants to hang on to the world, to money, to the old self. For your own sake and the sake of the church, please don't consider baptism until you are willing to let go of everything. That is what dying means.

When I became a Christian I knew that everything I had must come under God's lordship. Whatever God says must be done, will be done. My cherished ambitions had to go. I struggled for six months to let go of my dreams and ambitions, forsaking a way of thinking I had been cultivating over the years.

One day I knelt before God and said, "Lord, I surrender all to you." Then I got up as a man who had nothing, not even a clue as to what I will be doing from there on. Gone forever was the direction of life that I had been pursuing. I stood there newborn, having nothing and not knowing where to go. Naked I came into the world, naked I will leave it (cf. Job 1:21).

When you are born again, like a newborn babe you own nothing. Your bank account, big or small, is yours no longer. Everything, including you yourself, is God's from now on. "You are not your own" (1Cor.6:19), but belong to God. Yet to the spiritually-minded person, this is precisely the beauty of it all: *we now belong to God and to Jesus Christ, Son of God!* To him who loved us and gave himself for us! To

him who is Lord of all! But the carnal person wants to belong to no one but himself, and to live his life in his own self-centered way.

If anyone finds the Biblical teaching too difficult to accept, that is understandable. But in this case, he must at least have the honesty to admit, “I can’t become a Christian.” At least we are talking honestly without beating around the bush, without evading the real issues. It is all or nothing. Either you are born anew, or you immerse yourself to the full in this world. “Eat, drink, and be merry.” You will face the consequences in the future, but at least you are doing something that you find enjoyable now. I have repeated this almost *ad nauseam*. But no matter how often I say it, the message doesn’t seem to get across.

### **Renewal: an ongoing process**

The second thing that Paul talks about is “renewal” which in Biblical teaching, as we said earlier, is not to be confused with “regeneration”. The Greek word for “renewal” is *anakainōsis* (ἀνακαινώσις). *Ana* means *again*, and *kainōsis* means *renewal*. The combination carries the sense of “renew again,” and occurs twice in the New Testament, in Titus 3:5 and Romans 12:2 (“be transformed by the renewal of your mind”).

In the latter verse, “be transformed” is in the present tense, indicating that renewal is an ongoing process. The process begins only after the “washing of regeneration” has

taken place. Regeneration is something that happens once and for all—you are born—and what follows is the renewing process in which you grow into the fullness of Christ’s stature (Eph.4:13-15).

We cannot have renewal without regeneration, but neither can we have regeneration without finishing with the old life. When we are born again, we come naked into the spiritual world, and we live solely by God’s grace and mercy. Moment by moment we live by His grace and mercy, contrary to the teaching that says we are saved by a once-for-all act of grace which, if true, would mean that we don’t need God’s grace any more after regeneration.

Do we really think that although regeneration is by grace, we don’t need God’s grace in the continuing process of renewal? This is patently false. Paul asks pointedly, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now perfected by the flesh?” (Gal.3:3) Salvation in all its stages (regeneration, renewal, and the final attainment of the fullness of Christ’s stature) are all of grace by the Spirit.

### **As having nothing**

Let’s put this into practical details. If I am a student, my whole outlook changes when I become a Christian. My studies are now wholly at God’s disposal. I have no certificates, diplomas or degrees I could call my own; these belong to God because I now belong to Him. As Paul says, “You are not your own. For you have been bought with a

price, therefore glorify God in your body” (1Cor.6:19,20). Henceforth I cannot speak of anything as mine. Everything I have is God’s, because I am His.

But we must be clear about this: God looks for an inward change, not an external act of giving up something. Total commitment is not just the giving up of a job, but a whole new way of thinking. As Paul points out, “even if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing” (1Cor.13:3). Without love—without a real inner change—all this would be external, meaningless, and empty of value. Moreover this can lead to the dangerous notion of buying our salvation by giving up our jobs and possessions. It is dangerously close to salvation by works in which we buy salvation by sacrificing our own profession and possessions.

God doesn’t want our job or money. He wants our heart. Many people may be interested in our money, but God wants our heart. If we have not given Him our whole heart, He wouldn’t want a penny from us, let alone our car or house. First things first. Only when the heart is right with God can we talk about secondary things such as jobs and possessions.

If we are truly regenerate, we would consider nothing our own, just like the first Christians, of whom it is recorded that “not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own” (Acts 4:32). We likewise no longer leave God out of our plans, and say, “I am going to do this and that. I will do graduate studies, and get a job.” We now live under

the lordship of Christ, in total obedience to our God our Father.

We now understand what Paul means when he says, “As having nothing yet possessing all things” (2Cor.6:10). Possessing all things?! Though we claim nothing as our own, yet in Christ we find that *all* the things we need, whether spiritual or material, are provided for by our Father. Do we think we have done God a great favor in giving up what little we have? Then consider this astonishing statement, “For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas (Peter) or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God” (1Cor. 3:21-23)!

### **Verbs *anakainizō* and *anakainoō***

Only when we are truly regenerate can we talk about the next stage: *renewal*. Renewal too must be internal, not merely external. When the Bible speaks of the renewal of the mind it refers to our whole way of thinking, not merely employing our minds in religious activity.

Related to “renewal” (e.g., Romans 12:2, “renewal of the mind”) are two other verbs which together occur three times in the New Testament. These three occurrences give us a clear picture of what Scripture means by renewal, so we don’t have to resort to guesswork.



The verb *anakainizō* (ἀνακαινίζω), “to renew,” occurs in Hebrews 6:6. Let us read this well-known but frightening verse, starting from verse 4:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have **fallen away**, it is impossible to **renew them again** to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put him to open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

This passage is about apostasy. The word *parapiptō* translated in this passage as “fallen away” is defined as “to fail to follow through on a commitment, *fall away, commit apostasy*” in the standard BDAG Greek-English lexicon. Apostasy is not simply the committing of a serious sin, but a deliberate turning away from God after having made a commitment to Him. If a person apostatizes, it is impossible to renew him. There is no second chance. Nothing more can be done for him.

If you claim to be committed to God, bear in mind that it is dangerous to profess total commitment at baptism if in fact you are not truly committed, for the living God will require total commitment from you, for out of your mouth you will be judged (Mt.12:37; Lk. 19:22). If you claim to be totally committed, God will say, “I take you at your word and will require it of you.”

A related verb, *anakainoō* (ἀνακαινώνω), is used twice in the New Testament. It occurs in 2Cor.4:16 in the context

of persecution: “Though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being *renewed* day by day.”

Paul here speaks of being renewed *daily*. This reflects the fact that renewal is a process whereas being born again is once for all. After the new birth comes the continuing process of renewal. If we try to skip regeneration and jump straight to renewal, we will be caught in the battle between the old and the new. Some people skip regeneration and think that their efforts in renewing themselves are the evidence of their new birth.

If we try to renew ourselves by our own efforts even with sincere prayer, we are trying to change ourselves and our thinking without being regenerate. This will lead to problems. Many teachers and preachers have themselves never been properly taught about regeneration and renewal in the word of God. Some became Christians without being truly regenerate, so they cannot grow in the Christian life. Becoming a new person in Christ is not a matter of religious beliefs and moral reform, but of spiritual transformation by the power of God’s Spirit.

We may try to be nice, read the Bible, put money in the offering box, do good deeds, and even seek God’s guidance for our future—all this can be done without being regenerate. Many Christians confuse these Christian activities with the new life in Christ, and think that they are regenerate. This is a trap that many Christians have fallen into unintentionally.

## **Without regeneration we cannot discern God's will**

You might say to yourself, "I'm seeking God's will for my life. Should I marry this nice, handsome guy or not? You see, I did ask the Lord. My decision is admittedly in favor of marriage (he is so attractive), but at least I did ask God if I could marry this person."

But did you get an answer? You didn't hear the Lord say no, so you concluded that He gave you an okay. The problem is that without regeneration, you cannot know God's mind. It's all guesswork. In the end you will be so desperate for direction in the Christian life that you flip open the Bible and point your finger to a random passage that you hope will lead you to God's will.

The word of God is indeed crucial for divine guidance, but we won't find His leading in the Bible if we skip the first step, regeneration. Can God speak to us if our ears are blocked by sin and selfishness? Or if we are trying to sew a new piece of cloth onto an old garment (our old way of life)? Or trying to pour new wine (the new life in Christ) into the old wineskin of our self-centered life? The wineskin will burst when the wine expands. In man's desperation and cleverness, he arrives at a solution: fill the wineskin half full to give the wine enough room to expand! Caught in the tension between old and new, he still tries to evade committing totally to God by way of compromise.

There are many ways to fool ourselves but we cannot fool God, for God is not mocked (Gal.6:7). We will reap what

we sow. If we sow to the flesh we will reap corruption from the flesh. This is an inescapable law of life, whether in the physical or spiritual realm.

Let us not imagine that because the second stage—renewal—is a process, it includes the first. These are two different things. Do not skip the first step—regeneration—and think that our attempt at renewal means that we have been regenerated. If we make this basic mistake, for we will pay a high price for it in terms of unhappiness, hypocrisy, and finally the judgment.

Some have had the experience of speaking in tongues, so they think that this proves they are regenerate, born again. A person who has been born again could indeed be granted the experience or the gift of speaking in tongues, but the converse is not necessarily true, that is, *not all who speak in tongues are born again*. It is vital, especially in these last days, that we are aware that not all tongues-speaking is from God.

Have we truly been born again? Has God's transforming power come into our lives? Unless a man says goodbye to all that he has, he cannot be the Lord's disciple (Lk.14:33). It doesn't mean that Jesus doesn't want us to be his disciples, but that we are unable to ("cannot") be his disciples if we refuse to let go of our old life, our old way of thinking, our old self.

## Renewal in Colossians and Ephesians

The other place where *anakainoō* (renew) occurs is Colossians 3:10. Here again we see the passing of the old and the coming of the new. Reading from verse 9:

You laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.

Notice that it is “the new self (in Christ) who is being renewed”. It is not the old self but the new self that is being renewed. The old self is “laid aside”. In the Greek, “being renewed” is a present participle, indicating a continuous process that begins from regeneration.

A related word, *ananeoō*, occurs only once in the New Testament: “Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (Eph.4:22-23). Here again “renewed” is in the present tense (a continuing process), whereas “put off” is in the aorist (a once-for-all action). In the process of renewal, God causes us to grow into the likeness of His image.

## Are you truly regenerate?

To recapitulate, it is important for the sake of your eternal life in Christ that you know whether you are regenerate or not. If your Christian life is marked by internal conflict, constant spiritual defeat, and repeated yielding to the flesh

rather than going from strength to strength (cf. “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ,” 1Cor.15:57), then you probably have not been regenerated or become a new person in Christ.

You skipped regeneration and jumped to renewal. You patched an old garment with a new piece of cloth, only for the garment to be torn apart as the new cloth shrinks. We need to evaluate our own spiritual state if we wish to experience the Christian life that goes from strength to strength. Renewal is not a gloomy experience but a joyful process of growing in the strength of the Lord.

In my youth, I gloried in my physical prowess. Growing up does have its difficulties, but I was feeling great. As our physical skills improve and our strength increases, we will find ourselves engaging in a great variety of activities, gaining great satisfaction. That is what the Christian life ought to be like. Wouldn't we like to see a church full of people who find the Christian life delightful? Have we experienced what the Lord calls the “abundant life”?

If the abundant life is not real to us, we will make ourselves and others miserable. Are we a burden to others or are we an inspiration? Some Christians are burdensome, others are inspiring. With some Christians, just the mere thought of them makes you feel better already. Some refresh you by their very presence, others are a burden.

It should now be clear that the unregenerate person has the self as the center of his life, whereas the one who is truly born again is *God-centered*. It means that we can tell whether

we are regenerate or not by observing what, or who, is the center of our thoughts and actions. If our hearts and minds are focused on God and on Christ, and not on ourselves, we will know that we have received the new life in Christ and have become a new person in him.

May God, by His abundant grace, grant us to experience in our lives His reality and power in the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.





## Chapter 4



# REGENERATION AND VICTORY

## True and false assurance

Many Christians have grave doubts about their own spiritual condition, so they ask, “Am I regenerate? Have I been born again? Am I a true Christian?” It comes back to the same basic question: What is a Christian? Or what is regeneration?

In Scripture, a Christian is someone who has been born anew as a “newborn babe” (1Pet.2:2) in Christ. He or she has the new life in Christ and is a new person in him. That being so, how can I know that I have been born anew or that I am a true Christian?

We have two ways of dealing with the problem of assurance. The first way is to declare dogmatically that everything is fine simply by the fact that we have believed in

Jesus at some point in the past. So we close our eyes to our true spiritual condition.

The other way is to be spiritual realists who evaluate our own spiritual condition boldly and honestly, examining the evidence as to whether we are true disciples of Jesus. If the evidence is lacking, or if nothing indicates that we have been born again, then to stake a claim on assurance without a corresponding life quality would make us, of all men, most to be pitied. Christians of this kind must be the most wretched and self-deceived people who have ever walked on the face of the earth. Thinking that you have something when you don't really have it, is the ultimate self-delusion.

But if you see in your own life the evidence of regeneration, or if the Holy Spirit is clearly working in your life, then you have grounds for assurance. These are not merely experiential but also *biblical* grounds for assurance.

## **God always leads us in triumph**

Instead of focusing on one particular Bible passage, let us deal with this subject which spans the New Testament by looking more widely into the Scriptures. We begin with 2 Corinthians 2:14:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place.

A characteristic of the life in Christ is seen in the truth that God “always leads us in triumph”. The “always” makes

it clear that this is not an incidental or occasional experience in the Christian life, but something which characterizes it. It serves as a touchstone, a standard, a gauge, to test if we are Christians in the New Testament sense. Do we echo with these words or do they sound foreign, even preposterous, to us?

Do our lives spread the “sweet aroma” of Christ? A defeated Christian has no fragrance to spread. What he might spread instead is a miasma, a foul, poisonous odor of the old self-centered nature. The “old man” tries to conceal his spiritual miasma under a sprinkling of the man-made perfume of niceness or personal charm.

But the fragrance that Paul speaks of is the sweet fragrance in Christ of a sacrificial life that triumphs in every situation. The Greek word that is used here for “aroma” (*osmē*) is also used frequently in the Greek Old Testament (the LXX or Septuagint) for the fragrance or aroma that comes from the burning of the sacrifices offered to God on the altar. The word “aroma” is used 19 times in Leviticus (1:9,13,17, etc.) and 20 times in Numbers (15:3,7,10, etc.). In Ephesians 5:2, Paul uses the word with reference to Christ:

And walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

In Philippians 4:18, Paul uses “aroma” to characterize a love-gift which the Philippian Christians, who were extremely poor, insisted on giving to him.

If being *victorious* in Christ is an ongoing characteristic of the Christian life, it follows that the *fragrance* which flows from it is also a characteristic of the new life. These are a yardstick to measure our lives. Victory is a fundamental mark of the regenerate person, and with it comes a fragrance that glorifies God.

### **Paul appeals to his own life**

We tend to think that there are two types of Christians: victorious Christians and defeated Christians. Defeated Christians are supposedly also Christians, albeit of a lower class than victorious Christians. Because victory remains elusive to many people, we somehow accept the notion of a “defeated” Christian even though it is foreign to Scripture.

Whenever a church questioned whether Paul was preaching the true gospel, he would do one thing to reassure them. What was it? Did he wave his seminary degree or proclaim his doctrinal position? No, he simply told them to look at his blameless, triumphant life in Christ: “You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed.” (1Thess.2:10)

Whenever his apostleship or message was being challenged, time and again he would point to his own life as the evidence of his genuineness. “You know what manner of

men we are. Have we taken advantage of anyone or defrauded anyone? Look at our blameless lives. There is the evidence of our genuineness.” See Acts 20:33 and 2Cor.7:2.

How many Christians would dare use this as a test of their own genuineness? It is what we are, not what we say, that speaks powerfully and convincingly. Do those around us—those who live or work with us—notice a fragrant Christ-like aroma about us, or do they plead with God for strength to put up with us?

There are, of course, stages of spiritual growth. Young Christians may do wrong things in their ignorance and immaturity, and not out of sinful intent. Paul would often say to the spiritually immature, “Do you not know?” (14 times in his letters; 10 times in 1Corinthians, 6 times in 1Corinthians chapter 6 alone). Young Christians are ignorant of certain things, so we need to be patient with them if their heart is right even if they may slip occasionally. Long-time Christians cannot, however, appeal to spiritual infancy as an excuse for wrongdoing or for failing to live a victorious life that holds up to examination.

Perhaps for this reason many are afraid of communal living. It is easier to hide ourselves in a private corner than to participate in communal living where people can observe us from morning to night. That is the ultimate test. In church we can put up a front for a few hours, but in communal living, we cannot be on our guard day in and day out. Our true self will emerge sooner or later.

## **Not the eradication of sin but victory over sin**

We said earlier, but will elaborate in a later chapter, that holiness in a Christian is not the eradication of sin. Even if a person is holy or perfect according to Scriptural standards, it doesn't mean that the flesh doesn't entice him to sin, or that the world has no attraction for him, or that Satan doesn't try his best to tempt him. Holiness is not the eradication of the flesh's sinful inclination within us. What it does mean is that we triumph day in and day out, moment by moment, by God's grace. His grace is sufficient for us to overcome the inclination to sin. If we say that we have no sin or any inclination to sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). Everyone has the inclination to sin. But God "always"—not occasionally—leads us in triumph by the Holy Spirit.

Living in constant defeat, many Christians see no true spiritual or qualitative change in their lives since the time they made their profession of faith. There is nothing significantly new in their lives, nothing which they or others could see as a transformation. Their own baptism appears to be little more than an external ritual without true spiritual content. Unhappy with living in defeat, they try to get their spiritual foundation in order. They seek to start anew, and, by God's grace, put things right. They now recall that Scripture says, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mk.16:16).

## Faith precedes baptism

Faith precedes baptism, for it is faith that makes baptism meaningful. Without faith, baptism would be just an empty ritual. In Scripture, belief comes before baptism, as seen consistently in the book of Acts:

But when they **believed** Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were **baptized**. Then Simon himself also **believed**; and when he was **baptized** he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done. (Acts 8:12,13)

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, here is water. What hinders me from being **baptized**?” Then Philip said, “**If you believe with all your heart**, you may.” And he answered and said, “**I believe** that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he **baptized** him. (8:36-38)

Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul**. And when she and her household were **baptized**, she begged us, saying, “**If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord**, come to my house and stay.” So she persuaded us. (16:14,15)

Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, **believed on the Lord** with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, **believed and were baptized.** (18:8)

Then there is the remarkable account in Acts 10:47,48 in which the Gentile believers who had received the Holy Spirit were baptized:

“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized **who have received the Holy Spirit** just as we have?” And he commanded them to be **baptized in the name of the Lord.** Then they asked him to stay a few days.

The defeated Christian who longs for the victorious life will find himself struggling with questions such as: Do I have faith? Did I have faith when I was baptized? Is my faith of the kind seen in Acts 8:37, “If you believe with all your heart,” namely, a totally committed faith in Jesus?

If these questions are not answered in the affirmative, one would be left with a lack of assurance and a troubled conscience: Why am I still in my sins? How can I be set free from sin if I have never died to it? How could I have died to sin if I have never been united with Christ in his death through baptism? Paul touches on all these questions in Romans 6:1-4:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall **we who died to sin** still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been **baptized into his death?** Therefore we have been buried with him



**through baptism into death**, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might **walk in newness of life**.

## Should I be re-baptized?

Many Christians have doubts as to whether they have been truly born again. The request for rebaptism is usually a consequence of that uncertainty. Often the person would assess his or her situation in this way: “Should I be rebaptized, seeing that I am now prepared to make a commitment which I didn’t make in the past, or made only partially? When I was baptized, the pastor said nothing about total commitment, so my understanding of faith was rather woolly. I thought that believing in Jesus was simply a matter of accepting some doctrines, namely, that he went to the cross, that he died for my sins, that he rose again. I accepted all this, intellectually at least. But I didn’t understand faith in terms of a total commitment of heart, so I now doubt the validity of my baptism. I am now ready to be totally committed. Should I be rebaptized?”

It is tragic that such questions should arise in the first place, for it is the responsibility of every church and every pastor to explain what is involved in baptism. Of course, even if we made everything clear, we cannot plug all the loopholes. Some people make a profession of total commitment *insincerely*, and there is not much we can do about it.

### (1) The analogy of a legal document

Should you be re-baptized? It is like asking, Should you repeat a vow that you have made? Baptism is a vow, much like a marriage vow, in which you say yes to God. According to 1 Peter 3:21, baptism is a “pledge<sup>12</sup> of a good conscience toward God” (NIV).

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<sup>12</sup> The Greek word here for “pledge” is the noun *eperōtēma*. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich (*A Lexicon of the Greek-English New Testament*), under ἐπερώτημα, has: “a pledge (s. L-S-J s.v. 3 with pap. ref.) to God proceeding from a clear conscience (so GCRichards, JTS 32, '31, 77 and EGSelwyn, 1 Pt ad loc.)”.

They also give the meaning “request, appeal” but provide no evidence that the *noun* has this meaning. The authoritative Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, ed. by Jones, reprinted 1973, has no such definitions for the noun. It gives the following: “1. *question* 2. *answer to inquiry* 3. = Latin ‘stipulatio’ hence prob. *pledge*, 1 Pet. 3:21”. Moulton and Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, reprinted 1972, also give ‘stipulatio’. The verb ‘stipulor’ means “to pledge, agree upon”. The noun ‘stipulatio,’ a “contract, obligation, stipulation” (cf. *Follett World-Wide Latin Dictionary*).

Greeven, in *Theological Dictionary of the NT Abr. in One Volume*, under ἐρωτάω, writes, “*eperōtēma*. This word means ‘question.’ The only NT instance is in 1 Pet. 3:21, which perhaps rests on the use in the LXX for an oracular question addressed to God, so that we are to translate ‘request’”. But Greeven’s statement is problematic on two counts: (1) A “question” is not to be confused with a “request”. The former means to ask *about* something; the latter to ask *for* something. (2) *eperōtēma* does *not* occur in the LXX, hence its link to the LXX is tenuous to say the least, and certainly justifies Greeven’s tenuous “perhaps”. By contrast, “pledge” is on far more solid ground.

Hence baptism can be compared to the giving of a pledge or the signing of a legal document. After signing a legal document, do you sign it again? Would signing it twice make the document more effective and binding? Repeating your signature does not, of course, enhance the validity of the document. That you signed it once already makes it a legal and binding document.

A related question is, *What exactly did you sign?* Let's suppose the document had said, "I herewith and from this day on, finish totally with my old way of life, and henceforth acknowledge, without reserve, God as my Lord and King, and commit myself totally to Him. Signed, \_\_\_\_\_."

When you signed the declaration, maybe you didn't fully understand the terms "commit" or "Lord" or "King". But you signed it anyway. In a court of law, is that document valid or not? Of course it is. Once you sign it, the document is valid and binding.

If you later understand more fully what the lordship and kingship of God means, would your fuller understanding mean that you ought to sign the document again? Would that enhance the validity of the document? Obviously not. In other words, if at baptism you made a vow to the Lord—signing a legal document, as it were—pledging to accept God's lordship and kingship, and to commit totally to Him, would the validity of that document be enhanced by your deeper understanding of its contents? Would rebaptism make that vow more complete? Surely not. Rebaptism

would not make any difference, not any more than signing a document a second time.

## **(2) The contents of the document**

But a problem could arise in regard to the *contents* of the document. Suppose that in “signing” your baptismal “document” you did not pledge anything about God’s kingship or lordship, or about finishing with the old way of life. You now have a problem because you have never committed yourself. The problem lies not so much in the signing of the document, but in its contents. If your baptism was simply an induction into church membership, then all you have really signed for is church membership. If you later understand what total commitment is, namely, that God will be the Lord of your whole life, you clearly run into a problem: Is your baptism valid?

So the crucial question is: What did you “sign” at your baptism? What did you commit yourself to? What, if anything, did you pledge to the Lord? Many people make no commitment at baptism, or have never been asked to.

Maybe you didn’t even have time to prepare for your baptism. If the baptismal service was held in the evening and you were only informed about it in the afternoon, then your 100-meter dash to the baptismal pool would have given you virtually zero preparation time.

What then did you sign, pledge, or say “yes” to? If you had pledged nothing, or don’t even know what you pledged, then you have a problem of conscience. The question of the

validity of your baptism comes to the fore. Would to God that pastors and evangelists not be careless and irresponsible in administering baptism.

### **(3) Signing a legal document with wrong motives**

Here is an actual case that happened recently: A person was baptized in our church knowing all the conditions of baptism, but his commitment was insincere. He got baptized because his friends were getting baptized. God recently convicted him of his insincerity, and he repented of his attitude.

In this particular case, it was not I but another pastor who did the interviewing and baptizing. In the interview, the person gave insincere answers to the questions asked by the pastor. Now he confesses his insincerity. Is his baptism valid?

If you signed a legal document out of wrong motives, does that diminish the validity of the document? If someone signed away all his property for no good reason, would this nullify the document in a court of law? Can he plead before the judge, “I signed it for the wrong reasons, foolishly following my friend’s advice. May I be released?” You already know how the judge will answer: “No, you are still bound by the terms of the document. You signed it, and it remains legal and valid. Your motives are irrelevant. That you signed it is the only matter of legal significance.”

**(4) Your vow to the Lord stands**

If you have pledged total commitment to God, that pledge is binding even if you were insincere about it. God will hold you to account for it. This principle is seen in the striking example of Jephthah who made a hasty vow to Yahweh God, to offer as a burnt offering whatever will come out of his house to greet him after he defeats the Ammonites. He came to regret his vow, because it was his only child who came out to meet him (Judges 11:31-40). Foolish and careless though it was, his vow had to be carried out irrespective of his motives and intentions. Any pledge made to God is binding, and we are held accountable for it.

Christians are bound by their baptismal vows even if they are still unregenerate. Irrespective of their motives, they made their pledge and were baptized. But being unregenerate, they are now unable to fulfill their vows.

If that is your situation, then at the judgment God will hold you liable for what you have committed yourself to. He will judge you for failing to fulfill your vow. It would have been better not to have taken the step of baptism than, having taken it, not to live as a true believer, for God will judge us by our actions and our words (Mt.12:36,37).

If anyone professes to be a Christian, God will judge him or her as a Christian. Don't profess to be a Christian unless you are willing to be a genuine one because God will judge you as a Christian even if you don't live like one, that is, He will judge you by the higher standard of being a Christian.

Please don't get baptized unless you understand this point, for to be baptized without regeneration means that you are obliged to live by the requirements of the new covenant (New Testament) yet without the new life in Christ and the power of the indwelling Spirit. You have committed yourself to living by the new covenant standard, but without the power to fulfill it. You will be in constant breach of the covenant, and in a perpetual state of guilt. I beg of you, do not play around with the living God. "For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb.12:29), words which are addressed to Christians.

If you are an unregenerate Christian, and God is merciful to you, He will give you a bad time in order to bring you to repentance. Otherwise, what you will face at the judgment will be beyond imagination. God has no patience with liars. To have made a vow and not keep it is to have lied to God. Acts 5:1-11 records what happened to Ananias and Sapphira when they lied to God. They lied to Him over one seemingly small thing—the property they sold—and He dealt with them severely. God is a God of holiness and of truth. He has no patience with liars, though He has pity on those who make a genuine effort yet fail because of weakness.

Revelation 21:8 says that murderers, sorcerers, idolaters, and "all liars" will be cast into the "lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death". No liars will be found in the heavenly city. Who are liars but those who, for example, make a profession of allegiance to God at baptism but don't keep it? The God whom I know is the living God,

and I plead with you from the depths of my heart to walk truthfully with Him.

As for those who were intentionally insincere at baptism: If you were fully informed that your baptism involved the absolute lordship of God whereby God will come into your life as your Lord and King, then your baptism is valid irrespective of your motives.

Those who were baptized as infants run into a complication here. Baptism is a pledge to God of a good conscience (1Peter 3:21), and babies certainly cannot make any kind of pledge; nor is the question of a good conscience applicable to infants. In the New Testament, *repentance* and *faith*—two things that infants do not have—precede baptism. How then can infant baptism be valid?<sup>13</sup>

However, being intolerant and dogmatic doesn't help matters in the church of God. If anyone who was baptized as an infant thinks that his baptism is valid, that is a matter between himself and God. It is left to his conscience, for which he must answer to the Lord. It is not up to us to insist on rebaptism. But this person would do well to carefully consider whether there is any basis in God's Word for his baptism.

If you are considering rebaptism, recall what you pledged, if anything, at your baptism. What did you say to God? If you pledged total commitment to Him, your baptism

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<sup>13</sup> I am aware of the standard argument from Old Testament circumcision, etc., which in the light of the New Testament teaching just mentioned, carries little or no weight.



stands. This holds true even if you did not use the term “total commitment” but you understood baptism to mean death to the old way of life and entering a new life in which God is Lord. Your baptism remains valid, and rebaptism is unnecessary.

If you have *de jure* (publicly, i.e., before witnesses, formally, or “legally”) committed yourself to God, but have not *de facto* (in actual fact) lived as a true Christian, you need to ask whether you are truly born again. We don’t teach baptismal regeneration, that is, we don’t teach that baptism in itself can regenerate a person, because that would be to ascribe magical powers to baptism. When you receive baptism, that baptism does not automatically regenerate you. Regeneration is the result of the Holy Spirit’s work in your life when you open your heart to God.

Therefore baptism and regeneration can be two separate events, and very often they are. You may have been baptized (and are thereby bound by the terms of the new covenant), and you may want to claim the privileges of the new covenant granted to those who live by its obligations. But if you have not been born anew, you will be unable to live by the terms of the covenant, that is, to live as a true Christian. You will be so utterly defeated by sin, the flesh, and the powers of darkness, that you will soon give up in frustration in trying to be a true Christian despite not having been regenerated. If spiritual defeat and frustration is your usual experience, you have good reason to ask whether you are regenerate or not.

But if your regeneration took place sometime *after* your baptism, your baptism could be valid. (See the *Additional Note* at the end of this chapter.)

## **The evidence of regeneration**

Let us consider the signs of regeneration, and see if they are true in your Christian life. If these signs are not evident in your life, you have good reason to doubt whether you have been born again, and whether you are a true Christian according to the Scriptural definition of “Christian”.

## **The unregenerate man is a slave of sin**

If you are a non-Christian or a nominal Christian as opposed to a true Christian, how would you describe your spiritual situation? From your own experience, you would know that you are in bondage to sin, as described in Romans 7. In verse 14 Paul says, “We know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.”

The words “sold into bondage to sin” come from the vocabulary of slavery. Just as slaves were sold into bondage, so humankind has come under bondage to sin. Our sins have brought us under sin’s dominion, and we become slaves of sin. Romans 7:15-19 sums up the situation:

I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate ... No longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me. For I know that nothing good

dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.

Paul repeatedly says we are still able to “will” what is good. If that were not so, presumably you would not be reading this book about becoming a new person in Christ. You know what is right, and you earnestly “will” to do it, but you find yourself powerless to do it.

That is why we must be careful with the term “the bondage of the will”. The will is not in bondage in the sense of being incapable of willing what is good. “Bondage of the will” is a misleading phrase because the will, as Paul tells us, is not under bondage in the sense of being unable to desire what is good. The real problem lies not in the willing, but in the doing of what is willed. The will is in bondage only in the sense that it is unable to do the good that it wills. This is different from an absolute and total bondage of the will. The will is still free in the important sense of being able to desire the good.

The same passage says that we do the evil we don’t want to do. The evil that we do is *contrary* to our will. It is not really we who are doing the evil, but sin which indwells us. The indwelling sin enslaves us and compels us.

The mark of the unregenerate man is that he cannot do what is right. For example, you know that patience is good, but are you able to implement it? Somebody opens his mouth and irritates you. You try to suppress your anger and

work up some love, but you cannot help but be angry. Is that your experience? If you cannot refrain from doing evil despite your intention to do good, that is a sure sign that you are still under bondage to sin. You have not yet experienced regeneration whereby God's power comes in and sets you free.

## **Regeneration: Four aspects of being victorious**

### **1. Overcoming sin**

“If therefore the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). Have you ever experienced the Lord setting you free? If not, how are you any different from a non-Christian? He is in bondage to sin and you are in bondage to sin. Many Christians are different from non-Christians only in name.

Victory over sin is the mark of the regenerate man, whereas bondage to sin is the mark of the unregenerate man. Paul expounds this in Romans 8. But even before that, in Romans 6, he repeatedly says that we are no longer under the dominion of sin, as in the following statements:

- We should no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin (vv.6,7)
- Consider yourselves dead to sin but alive to God (v.11)

- Do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts (v.12)
- Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace (v.14)
- You are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness (v.16)
- You were slaves of sin (v.17)
- Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (v.18)
- Having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life (v.22).

If sin does not control us, it cannot compel us to do something against our will. Because Christ has set us free, our will is free to do what is right in God's eyes. It is as simple and wonderful as that. We don't need to be theologians to see the contrast between victory and defeat, or between freedom from sin and slavery to sin.

Are we triumphant over sin? Do we have the power to do the good we want to do? That power comes not from our human strength but from God's indwelling Spirit. That is what being saved by grace means. God's grace to us is His gracious gift of the new life in Christ. This new life carries God's transforming and enabling power, which saves us

from the power of sin day by day. This victorious life is the Christian life that God calls us to live.

## **2. Power: Nothing will be impossible to you**

Matthew 17:14-20 has a striking story of a man who begs Jesus to heal his demon-possessed son because the disciples could not cast out the demon. Jesus replies,

“O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to me.”

Jesus immediately casts out the demon, and the boy is freed. The disciples ask Jesus privately, “Why couldn’t we cast it out?” Jesus replies,

“Because of the littleness of your faith, for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you.”

*Nothing shall be impossible to you.* We will have power over demons. More than that, we will triumph in every situation. There is no enemy in the world that we cannot overcome through God’s power, whether it be the flesh or the self or the devil. As the apostle Paul put it, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil.4:13).

We often assume that when Jesus said, “Nothing shall be impossible to you,” he was referring to miracles. That is a mistake, for these words have as much to do with the

Christian life as with miracles. But because we limit these words to the doing of miracles, we fail to see their relevance to daily life. These words have, in fact, everything to do with daily living. Nothing will be impossible to us *every day*. If God tells us to do something, we will be able to do it. If He gives us a command, He will empower us to obey it. If He tells us to love, He will empower us to love the unlovely. If He tells us to be holy, He will give us the power of holiness. If God has the power and we have the commitment, is there any reason for failure and defeat?

Many Christians are powerless because they do not apply this truth in their daily lives. If the words “nothing shall be impossible to you” were true in our lives, we would be able to fulfill any mission that God entrusts to His people in these last days. This includes bringing the gospel to “the whole world for a witness to all nations, and then the end shall come” (Mt.24:14). We will discover that every obstacle can be overcome. Casting out demons or healing the sick will be done by that same sovereign power from God.

But if these words aren't true in our lives, or if we don't live in practical holiness, it would be impossible for us to triumph in any area of our lives. These words must first be applied *internally* in our hearts; then we will discover that nothing is impossible in the spiritual life. Only then can we apply it *externally* in healing or exorcism.

Which is more difficult, casting out a demon or living in holiness? Which requires greater power? Anyone who has tried to live a life of holiness in all sincerity would know that

the two are equally difficult, indeed impossible. It takes the same mighty power of God to love the unlovely as to heal a crippled man. If you have not experienced that power *inside* you, clearly you would be unable to apply it *externally*.

Though it is God's power that is at work in both aspects, internal and external, does it mean that they are equally powerful manifestations of God's power? Does it mean, for example, that the one who heals the sick by God's power is necessarily a holy man? Jesus warns us that this is not necessarily so, for it is possible to do great *external* works for God, yet not have *internal* holiness. This is something we must grasp if we are to avoid being self-deceived in this age of spiritual darkness. Jesus said,

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness" (Mt.7:21-23).

These people had learned to do miracles in Jesus' name, but their lives were not submitted to God's will. Hence they will have no place in God's kingdom. Paul says much the same:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to



remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing (1Cor.13:1,2).

Let us not imagine that if we speak in tongues or perform miracles, we are in a favored position before God, or that these prove that we are regenerate. If we don't have His love, His holiness, or His life in us, we are "nothing" (1Cor.13:2) before God even if we have such faith as to move mountains (and surely no born-again child of God is "nothing" to Him). Hence it turns out that the *internal* victory over sin and self is far more important than the *external* manifestation of miracles.

Why does Jesus speak of doing the impossible? Because it's impossible for us to live the new life in a sin-dominated world. Our old self-centeredness, combined with sin dwelling in our flesh and the powers of darkness in the world, all form a colossal force that is opposed to our new life in Christ. There is absolutely no way for us to triumph except by God's power. If the Christian life could be lived in our own strength, we wouldn't need God at all. The reality is that the Christian life involves the daily application of God's power through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. For this reason we glory in the gospel of the living God. By faith in God we do the impossible.

The Christian who walks with God won't live in the shadows of defeat because all things are possible to him through God. That is a huge claim to make, but no bigger than what is expressed in, "Thanks be to God who always

leads us in His triumph in Christ” (2Cor.2:14). This victory touches every aspect of the Christian life, including prayer.

We fix our eyes on the good news that salvation is by grace, not just in terms of a one-time forgiveness of sins, but in terms of living by God’s power day by day.

### **3. You will receive what you ask: fruitfulness**

Jesus says, “I appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16). If we profess to be born-again Christians, do we bear fruit, and does our fruit remain? Fruitfulness is another evidence of regeneration.

The Lord goes on to say, “That whatever you ask of the Father in my name, He may give to you.” Here is another clause without limits. If you bear fruit, the Father will give you *whatever* you ask Him in Jesus’ name. Amazing! Nothing will be impossible to you, for you will receive what you ask for. That is the kind of power we need for dealing with real-life situations. The word “whatever” covers every situation. Every new day has its own unique situations and challenges. We need a blanket assurance, as it were, to meet every new situation, every new conflict, every new pressure, and every new trial. In every situation we have the assurance that whatever we ask for, we will receive it, so that we may be victorious over sin and be fruitful for God.

It doesn’t mean that we ask for a Cadillac or BMW. If we think that God will give us whatever we want to satisfy our lust and greed, we have not understood the Scriptures at all.

We must learn to consider all earthly and transient things—money, houses, cars, prestige—as little more than garbage when compared to what is eternal. We are to have Paul’s attitude when he says, “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil.3:8). What the spiritual man seeks is not material blessings but victory and the assurance of answered prayers.

#### **4. Joy**

Jesus says, “Truly, truly I say to you, if you shall ask the Father for anything, He will give it to you in my name.” (John 16:23) Note again the blanket assurance in the word “anything”. The next verse says, “Until now you have asked for nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full.”

The defeated man is joyless. He has a heavy, sullen look on his face, not a cheerful smile. Joy doesn’t come naturally to a person who had just failed his exams or lost in a competition. Defeat brings sorrow, but the Lord wants us to have joy.

“But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2Cor.2:14). Does God lead us in triumph so that we may brag about it? No, it is for the purpose of spreading the beauty and fragrance of Christ’s life to others, that they may be drawn to him. The joy which God gives us then overflows to other people, strengthening

them in their weakness, and encouraging them in their sadness.

This kind of joy is rare today, so it may have the unintended consequence of creating envy in those who lack joy and victory. I recently heard someone graciously share that at one time she was having a hard time living victoriously. When she saw that others were doing slightly better, she felt uneasy and unhappy. Those who live in constant defeat would feel uncomfortable mingling with those who are victorious.

But Jesus wants us to live victoriously. We cannot do it in our own strength, so he tells us, “Ask for whatever is needed for victory, and it will be given to you.”

The Christian who applies Jesus’ words will know no defeat. It does not mean that he is immune to pain, suffering, affliction, or persecution. At times he may be knocked down, but not permanently knocked out. Paul describes this from his own experience:

But we have this treasure (the light of the knowledge of God in Christ, v.6) in jars of clay (our bodies), to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. (2Corinthians 4:7-10, NIV)

The remarkable thing that emerges from this passage is not only that Paul was able to steadfastly endure the most

adverse circumstances thanks to God's "all-surpassing power" in him (v.7), but also that in these circumstances he joyfully and triumphantly fulfilled the mission entrusted to him, namely, to reveal the life of Jesus in his body. And what happens when the life of Jesus is revealed? It brings the light of salvation to all who see it (v.6). The preceding section tells us that all this is in the context of the preaching of the gospel.

The victorious life is not easy. Victory implies battle. How can there be victory without battle? The greater the battle, the greater the victory and the power needed. The greater the challenge, the greater the grace that God supplies. We go from strength to strength, from one level of challenge and victory to the next.

### **Overcoming in Revelation 2 and 3**

In the letters to the seven churches recorded in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, the word "overcome" occurs seven times in the space of two chapters (Rev.2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). This shows that overcoming is essential for salvation, for he who overcomes will eat of the tree of life (2:7), will not be hurt by the second death (2:11), and will have his name kept in the book of life (3:5).

Those who fail to overcome will end in tragedy, such as those who have entered into a relationship with God at baptism, yet have been living in disobedience and defeat. Here is what the Lord says about "overcoming":

(1) *“To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God”* (Rev.2:7). The privilege of eating of the tree of life was taken from Adam and Eve, but is granted to those who are regenerate and victorious. Defeated Christians will have no access to the tree of life because they, like Adam, have failed. Those who don’t overcome sin by the grace and power which God has provided won’t enter the Paradise of God, or eat of the tree of life.

(2) *“He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death”* (Rev.2:11). The defeated Christian will come under the penalty of the second death. The first death is physical death, the second is spiritual death. To die physically is no great deal, but to die spiritually is to be finished forever. This is what hell is about.

(3) *“To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna”* (Rev.2:17). Manna represents the bread of life, given to those who overcome. But those who lack the bread of life will perish.

(4) *“To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations ... I will also give him the morning star”* (Rev.2:26,28). The overcomers will reign with Christ. What is the morning star? It is revealed at the end of Revelation that the morning star is none other than Jesus himself (Rev.22:16)! At the cross he gave himself for us. If by grace we are overcomers, he will give himself to us! To have him is to have more than everything that is worth having.

(5) *“He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life”* (Rev.3:5). The overcomers will be clothed in white. In heaven everyone will be dressed in white (representing purity, righteousness, cf. Rev.3:4,18; 19:8). Anyone who is not dressed in white will end up like the man who didn’t have a wedding garment and was cast into the outer darkness (Mt.22:11-13). Only the victorious will be dressed in white, ready to enter the kingdom of heaven. He who does not overcome will have his name removed from the Book of Life, and will end up in the second death.

(6) *“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, and my new name”* (Rev.3:12). Only the victorious will abide in God’s heavenly temple and dwell in His presence forever. They will have Jesus’ new name written on them, that is, they will be his special possession.

(7) *“He who overcomes, I will grant him to sit down with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne”* (Rev.3:21). Sitting down with Christ on his throne! That indicates many things: fighting with him in the final decisive victory, receiving authority from him, being glorified together with him and, above all, being close to him and enjoying intimate fellowship with him.

May we, by his grace, be found among the overcomers.

## ADDITIONAL NOTE: A CASE OF REBAPTISM IN ACTS

**R**ebaptism is hardly ever mentioned in the New Testament, but where it is mentioned (in Acts 19), it enhances our understanding not only of baptism but also of John's baptism. The following is a case of rebaptism that took place in Ephesus, where Paul rebaptized around 12 men though they had already received John's baptism:

<sup>1</sup> And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." <sup>4</sup> And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all. (Acts 19:1-7, ESV)

How do we understand this remarkable account? Christians, especially those who don't know that "Christian" baptism has its origins in John's baptism, may think that the



12 men were rebaptized because there was something incomplete about John's baptism that necessitated rebaptism.

But let us look at the matter carefully. Where did John's baptism come from? Was it from heaven, that is, from God? Or was it from men? This was the question Jesus asked the Pharisees when they were challenging his authority (Mk. 11:30; Lk.20:4). It is said elsewhere (in Luke 7:30) that the Pharisees, by refusing to be baptized by John, were rejecting God's purpose for them.

But if John's baptism is from God, why were the 12 men rebaptized with another baptism, the so-called "Christian" baptism? It is remarkable that the rebaptism even took place at all, because these two baptisms—John's baptism and Christian baptism—are the same in substance, with *both* expressing repentance and faith in Jesus.

Contrary to what we may think, both these elements—repentance and faith in Jesus—are integral to John's baptism, as seen in Paul's statement to the 12 men: "John baptized with the baptism of **repentance**, telling the people to **believe in him** who was coming after him, that is, **in Jesus**" (Acts 19:4).

Likewise both these elements, repentance and faith, are integral to Christian baptism, as seen in Acts 2:38 ("repent and be baptized") and Col.2:12 ("baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith").

It is crucial for us to resolve the status of John's baptism because the preceding passage, Acts 18:24-28, speaks of Apollos, a believer who had an outstanding church ministry,

and who even coworked with Paul and Peter (1Cor.3:6,22). But against our expectations, verse 25 says that Apollos had received “only the baptism of John”. The Bible never says that Apollos was subsequently rebaptized by Paul or anyone else.

Moreover, a few of the apostles—most certainly Peter—had earlier been followers of John the Baptizer (John 1:35-42), also known as John the Baptist, and for that reason they must have been baptized by John. Yet there is no record that these apostles were ever rebaptized after they had come to know and follow Jesus.

And we must not forget that Jesus himself was baptized by John. Or that vast multitudes came to John to be baptized by him (Luke 3:7,10), with no subsequent record of mass rebaptism.

Moreover, the 12 men in Acts 19 were called “disciples” (v.1) despite having received only John’s baptism. “Disciple” is the usual term for a Christian (Acts 11:26). This would indicate, at the very least, that the 12 men had associated with the wider group of disciples in Ephesus, and were regarded as being part of that fellowship by the fact that they had received baptism, albeit John’s baptism. The 12 men must have, in addition, believed in Jesus in some sense, or they wouldn’t have been regarded as disciples. Indeed Paul spoke of them as having “believed” (v.2). Hence they were not total unbelievers, otherwise Paul would not have asked them whether they have received the Holy Spirit (v.2).

All this shows that the problem in regard to the 12 men in Ephesus does not lie in John's baptism. John's baptism was certainly from God, being appointed and approved by God. There must have been some other factor that rendered the first baptism of the 12 men invalid, such that they needed to be rebaptized.

The problem cannot be that their baptism was not done "in the name of Jesus," for the same was true of the first apostles and of Apollos. The answer to this is found in Acts 19:2 which tells us that the real problem was that the men had not received the Holy Spirit: They said "no" when Paul asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

But if that is the case, why was it necessary to rebaptize them? Couldn't they simply have received the laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit? This was exactly what was done in the case of the people in Samaria who had not received the Spirit when they were baptized in the name of Jesus. So the apostles laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:16-17).

The problem was not only that the 12 men in Ephesus hadn't received the Holy Spirit, but that *they hadn't even heard of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 19:2). They must have been Gentiles who were unfamiliar with the Old Testament, for no Jew could have failed to know of the Holy Spirit (cf. Psalm 51:11, "Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me"). Since the 12 men had

not even heard of the Holy Spirit, their contact with the disciples in Ephesus must have been recent.

The best evidence therefore indicates that the men in Ephesus were earlier baptized by Gentile followers or proselytes of John the Baptizer who were poorly taught in the things of God. As a result, these 12 men were so ignorant of the things of God (apart from repentance) that they could scarcely have made a meaningful commitment to God at their baptism. But the matter becomes clearer when we look at Acts 19:4-5:

Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of **repentance**. He told the people to **believe in the one** coming after him, that is, **in Jesus**.” On hearing **this**, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:4-5, NIV)

What is “this” new information that they had just heard from Paul and which led to their rebaptism? It was certainly not the teaching of repentance, for without repentance they wouldn’t even have received John’s baptism. What is evidently new to the 12 men is the other vital element of baptism, namely that *John the Baptizer himself had preached faith in the Lord Jesus*. These 12 men evidently did not know that John preached faith in Jesus, or that he had pointed to Jesus as “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (Jn.1:29,36).

Since these 12 men did not know the full meaning of John’s baptism including that part about faith in Jesus, they could not have made any commitment of faith in Jesus at

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their first baptism, rendering their baptism invalid. The problem does not lie in John's baptism itself but in how it was administered and explained. But as soon as the whole meaning of John's baptism was explained to the 12 men, they immediately put their faith in Jesus, and were rebaptized by Paul "into the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:5).

John's baptism, if it includes the dual elements of faith and repentance, is valid, and does not need to be followed by rebaptism.



## Chapter 5



# SEVEN MARKS OF A REGENERATED CHRISTIAN

## Second blessing?



It is disturbing that many Christians are slow to grasp the basic things of the Christian life. Many spend their Christian lives without experiencing the reality of regeneration and the new life in Christ. As a result, some Christians think that what they need is a “second blessing,” as it is called in some churches. An examination of this second blessing in the light of God’s Word shows that it is really nothing other than the regeneration experience, and not something additional to it. There is nothing in the second blessing that is not already included in regeneration.

But if by “second blessing” one is referring exclusively or primarily to an experience of speaking in tongues, then this second blessing isn’t necessarily from regeneration. That is

to say, a person who speaks in tongues is not necessarily regenerate. Anyone who is not born anew—born from above—cannot be filled with the Spirit. Encouraging an unregenerate person to speak in tongues could lead him into self-deception or Satan’s deception. Encouraging unregenerate “Christians” who have not yet repented of their sins or yielded their lives to God, to speak in tongues is to expose them to the risk of being filled with the wrong spirit, an evil spirit. This, sadly, has happened not infrequently.

I have been reading accounts of people who have gone through the “second blessing”. The new things they experienced should have been part of the “first blessing” of being born anew which they hadn’t experienced in the first place. For example, they speak of a renewed intimacy with God, or a sense of God’s presence, or a deep inner joy. All these things are in fact part of regeneration which they should have experienced at the beginning of the new life in Christ.

Some people in their “second blessing” see the need to stop living in their own strength and live by the power of the indwelling Spirit that is given to those who belong to Christ. This, too, is a part of the basic regeneration experience. *The one fundamental blessing that God has given us is the blessing of regeneration.*

Many Christians accept the idea of a second blessing either because they have a wrong understanding of regeneration or because they have not experienced regeneration in the first place. They may have been attending church for



many years without experiencing the abundant Christian life. The idea of a second blessing is especially appealing in the Western world where many have been baptized as infants, or have been converted at evangelistic meetings but without being born from above in the biblical sense. They somehow think that their initial decision to accept Christ is the same as regeneration. Before long, however, they run into spiritual problems and find their Christian life unsatisfactory. They search for something better, and when they find it, they call it the “second blessing”.

The second blessing teaching embraced by our Pentecostal and charismatic friends has given rise to much debate in the church. Other Christians would say to the Charismatics, “You’re wrong. We received the Holy Spirit when we became regenerate.” That may be true in theory, but the Charismatics are also right in replying, “But you have not experienced the fullness of the Spirit, have you?”

The confusion arises because some teachers have sliced regeneration into two blessings: a first and a second. To dispel this misconception, let us look at the seven marks of regeneration as we find them in John’s writings. These seven marks are part of regeneration, with or without a second blessing.

## The seven marks of regeneration

In the last chapter we considered only one mark of regeneration: *victory*. This mark is ultimately a consequence of the seven marks we are about to consider.

The regenerate man always lives in triumph. 1John 5:4 says, “*Whoever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.*” We have already considered this in some detail, and we won’t repeat it. It would be good, however, to remind ourselves of the important fact that every regenerate Christian lives in victory. If your Christian life is defeated, something must be fundamentally wrong with it. You may be in need of regeneration.

Let us now consider the seven marks of regeneration in the Johannine writings: John’s Gospel, John’s letters, and Revelation.

### First mark: Authority to be children of God

In John 1:12-13 we read:

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (RSV)

In our natural or physical birth, we were indeed “born of blood,” and “of the will of the flesh,” and “of the will of

man”. But in our spiritual birth, we are “born of God” (regenerated).

The statement, “*He gave power (or authority) to become children of God,*” is deep, and it would take a whole sermon to expound it. For our present purposes, we focus on the word “power”<sup>14</sup> which John uses. Without God’s power, we cannot be children of God, for we lack the power to save ourselves or make ourselves born anew. It is God’s power through His Spirit in our lives that causes us to be born from above. We cannot be true Christians in the Biblical sense without God’s power. That is the fundamental doctrine of grace.

The power to become children of God is not a one-time experience. At this very moment, long after we have been born anew, we continue to live as children of God by that same power.

Some want to live as true Christians, but fail miserably for the lack of power. True Christianity becomes to them an unattainable ideal. We may sing the hymn “Oh, to be like Thee” in all earnestness, but can we attain it in practice? It

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<sup>14</sup> *Exousia*, ἐξουσία, means “power, authority to do a thing” also “abundance of means, resources” (*A Greek-English Lexicon*, Liddell, Scott, Jones). Also, Arndt, Gingrich, Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT*: 1. “right to act,” 2. “ability to do something, capability, might, power,” 3. “authority”. In giving us the right to become children of God, God did not just give us a name or a title, but with it the “power,” the “right to act” or to function, as children of God. We did not merely receive a name without the substance, for God gave us an “abundance of resources,” and with it the “capability” to live as children of God.

would be utterly futile to try to live the Christian life in one's own strength. It would lead to a never-ending cycle of begging for forgiveness from dawn to dusk: "Lord forgive me, Lord forgive me." This pitiful begging for forgiveness is the result of being powerless to live the Christian life.

There are those who even think that it is pious to spend the whole day begging for forgiveness. There is certainly a place for repentance and forgiveness, but is the Christian life not something more than this?

The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, etc—conveys a picture of spiritual riches. But if our Christian life is an unending cycle of confession and forgiveness, we are in effect blaming God for not giving us the strength to live the abundant life. Have we experienced the reality of the God-empowered life? Should we not be living a life that glorifies His name?

If we keep on asking for forgiveness, we are declaring one of two things. These are the only two logical possibilities; I can't think of a third. Either we are unwilling to live as sons of God (in which case our salvation is in doubt) or we are unable to (in which case our salvation is also in doubt).

Are you unwilling or unable? If you are unwilling, how can you consider yourself a child of God? If you are unable, you need to receive God's saving power into your life.

Of course no one is absolutely perfect in the present age. We occasionally do things that are unbecoming of children of God, so we need to beg the Lord's forgiveness. We failed because we were careless, not because God's power was

inadequate. God's power was there all along, but we failed to draw from it.

In this generation are multitudes of weak Christians who make no impression on the non-Christian world. The non-Christian sees the Christian as very ordinary: "If Christians are like that, why should I become a Christian?"

Are you a new person in Christ? Do you live as a child of God who enjoys a certain sweetness of communion with God? I qualified the statement with "a certain sweetness" because we are still progressing in the Lord, and the sweetness will become sweeter. Our Christian life might not yet be perfect in every detail, but it ought to have the quality that befits a child of God.

The power or authority that God gives us is real and something we can experience. Either God is real or He is not. If He is not real, there would be no spiritual power to talk about. We might try to work up a psychological feeling or do things in our own strength, but that would be mere moral reform by human effort and has nothing to do with Biblical salvation.

But if God is real, then His power is available to us. People who have been born anew experience God's sustaining power, and are conscious of His reality. They know that the power comes not from themselves but from God. If God is only a theoretical or psychological abstraction to us, then we are still unregenerate.

All this is progressive. God will become more real to you as you experience more of His work in you and through you.

As your eyes are being opened, one day you may catch a vision like the one granted to Elisha and his servant (2 Kings 6:17). Surrounded by formidable and dangerous enemies, they were given a vision of Yahweh's army and chariots of fire. Though Elisha lived in the Old Testament era, he surpassed most Christians in terms of knowing the living God. If we are truly regenerate, we too will know God in a real way even if our knowledge of Him is still in its early stages.

## **Second mark: Seeing the Kingdom of God**

Jesus says to Nicodemus, a prominent teacher of the Jews: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) The positive form of this vital statement is: If you are regenerate (born anew), *you will see the kingdom of God.*

The kingdom of God is the kingship of God. Everyone who is born anew sees God's kingship even in this dark world where His kingship is hidden from the natural eye. The natural man looks here and there, but does not see it. But the spiritual man, with eyes of faith, looks beyond the present situation and catches a vision of God's kingship.

The Syrians wanted to capture Elisha (2 Kings 6:13) because they found him more exasperating than all the armies of Israel combined. How could one man stir up so much trouble for them? That was because Elisha, a prophet, knew everything that the Syrian king was discussing in his secret meetings (vv.8-9,12). That was why the king

wondered, “How does Israel know our secrets?” His advisors told him that Elisha knew every word that the king spoke. That made him more dangerous than all the soldiers and chariots of Israel put together.

The Syrian army eventually tracked down Elisha and surrounded him. Early in the morning, Elisha’s servant woke up and saw an army with impressive horses and war chariots. The anxious “servant” <sup>15</sup> cried out to Elisha, “Alas, my master, what shall we do?” (v.15) Elisha told him, “Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” Elisha had complete peace of heart because he knew the living God. That kind of inner peace is beyond understanding—even irrational—to those who don’t know the kingship of the living God. Elisha prayed, “O Lord, I pray Thee, *open his eyes that he may see.*” And what did his servant see? “Behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (v.17). Yahweh God’s mighty army was there to ensure His servants’ safety.

Pontius Pilate, who exercised Roman imperial power over Judea, said to Jesus, “Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?” but Jesus answered, “*You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above*” (Jn.19:10-11). Jesus knew that his

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<sup>15</sup> This almost certainly refers to a disciple who accompanied and attended to his teacher. The same Hebrew word שֶׂרָף, translated here in 2Kings 6:15 as “servant” in most English versions, is used of Elisha himself in relation to Elijah (1Kings 19:21), and of Joshua in relation to Moses (Joshua 1:1).

life was in his Father's hands, not Pilate's. Pilate could do nothing to Jesus, not even touch a hair on his head, unless his Father permitted it.

If we profess to be born-again Christians, do we see God's kingship? In a world plagued by pollution, strife, economic instability, and life-threatening diseases, where is God's kingship to be seen? Yet he who is born of the Spirit sees the kingship of God.

The kingship of Yahweh God is the first and most basic element of prophetic visions. Isaiah's first vision was that of "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1). It was a vision of God's kingship. In verse 5 Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me ... for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" That vision of the Lord as King dominated Isaiah's prophetic ministry and proclamation. When lowly Israel was surrounded by the world powers—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon—Isaiah surveyed the world situation and declared, "My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Elsewhere Isaiah proclaimed, "Your God reigns" (52:7; cf. 43:15, 44:6).

Jeremiah's vision of God's kingship is seen in the words, "*Is Yahweh not in Zion? Is her King not in her?*" (Jeremiah 8:19).

The great prophet Daniel did not, however, use "King" as a title for Yahweh God. That was because the title "king of kings" was already appropriated by Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:37). Daniel felt that the title "king" had been devalued, so he referred to Yahweh God with the greatest



title of all: “The Most High” (six times in Daniel 4 alone). Daniel was in effect saying to Nebuchadnezzar, “You call yourself the king of kings, but there is another title that is the highest by definition: ‘the Most High’. The Most High is higher than you, O ‘king of kings’”. In Daniel 5:18, Daniel refers to Belshazzar as “king” but refers to God as “The Most High God”.

The prophet Zechariah was content to use the title, “the King, the Lord of hosts” (Zech.14:17). Zephaniah spoke of “the King of Israel, Yahweh” (Zeph.3:15). We can go on and on through the prophets (e.g. Mal.1:14). Every prophet from Elisha to Isaiah, Jeremiah to Daniel, Zephaniah to Zechariah, saw Yahweh God as King.

Elisha’s vision of God’s kingship was so assured that he was unimpressed with earthly kings and the great ones of this world. He said to the king of Israel, “What have I to do with you? ... As the Lord of hosts lives, whom I serve, were it not that I have regard for Jehoshaphat the king of Judah (a godly king), I would neither look at you, nor see you” (2 Kings 3:13-14). The prophetic vision enables one to see God as the Most High, the true King of kings who executes His counsels in the world. Likewise, those who are born again will “see” the kingdom, or the kingship, of God. “*Your God reigns*” (Isa.52:7).

Do we have this vision? We must, like Paul, look at the eternal things, not at the things that are passing away (2Cor. 4:18). If we see God’s kingship, our sense of values will be radically transformed. Formerly it was focused on transient

material things but now it is focused on what is spiritual and enduring.

Have you been born of the Spirit? Just take a look at your sense of values. Which is more important to you, the transient or the eternal? How do you regard your job, your career or your future in the world? What sense of values governs your decision-making? If you have been born anew, you would have a new sense of values through a transformed mind (e.g., Romans 12:2).

### **Third mark: Controlled by the Spirit**

The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:8).

We can understand the reference to “wind” in this passage if we realize that the word for “wind” and the word for “Spirit” are one and the same word in the original Greek text of John’s Gospel.

*The wind blows where it wishes*, and you cannot predict its next direction. Any sailor would know that the wind is erratic. He keeps an eye on the sail boom because it could suddenly swing around and hit him on the head. Some have drowned after being knocked into the waters by the boom.

*The wind blows where it wishes*. The weather vane spins with the blowing of the wind.

Then Jesus goes on to make a startling statement: “*So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” The Holy Spirit—the

Spirit “wind”—is sovereign in the world and carries out God’s purposes. The Spirit acts according to God’s wisdom and power, and is not controlled by man.

God’s mind cannot be understood in human terms. His thoughts are above our thoughts. “Who has directed the Spirit of Yahweh, or as His counselor has instructed Him?” (Isa.40:13). “Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?” (Rom.11:34). We might not fathom the depths of God’s mind, but when God deals with us, He has our spiritual benefit in mind.

“So is everyone born of the Spirit”—*every regenerate person lives under the control of the Spirit*, and acts according to divine instruction. If we profess to be born of God, do we live under the Spirit’s control? If the Spirit tells you to go this way, do you go this way; or that way, and you go that way?

If you do, then you in turn become unpredictable and unintelligible to the natural man. He doesn’t understand you because the natural man doesn’t understand or accept the things of the Spirit, these being foolishness to him (1Cor.2:14). For that reason, neither can the natural man understand you if your life is controlled by the Spirit of God.

You may be having a great career and making good money when the Spirit suddenly intervenes, and you swing in the opposite direction. People are puzzled: “What has happened to him? He quits his job and wants to serve God.

He spends all his time reading the Bible instead of the magazines he used to enjoy.” The natural man cannot understand you because your life is guided by the Spirit of God.

But the spiritual man understands spiritual things. And if you are governed by the same Spirit that governs the spiritual man, he would understand you very well. That is why those who are governed by the Spirit have one heart and mind, for it is the same Spirit who moves in all of them. But where there is disharmony, there must be someone who is not being governed by the Spirit of God. That person will create disharmony in the church. When that situation arises, those who are entrusted with the welfare of the church must keep watch and intervene speedily.

Do you understand the things of God? Or is it the world that understands you well? You have good reason to worry if the world understands you. But if the world doesn't understand you, you can thank God, for you might be living under the control of the Spirit.

Does the world find you predictable? Do you go where money or reputation is found? Are you attracted to money as bees are attracted to honey, or cockroaches to garbage? That is why Christians have no witness in the world today. The non-Christians say to them, “You Christians are just like us. You pursue the things that we pursue, things such as money and status.” Non-Christians are not convicted by anything they see in this kind of Christian. But if non-Christians react to you with wonder, or even hostility or confusion, that is good! At least you are making an impact!

At least the natural man finds you unpredictable and unintelligible, like the Spirit of God Himself.

Our Christian life ought to make the non-Christian say, “I don’t understand him. Why is he like that?” That’s a good sign! He or she is asking questions, and he may find an answer that could well lead him to God’s kingdom. Many people, including the apostle Paul, have entered the kingdom who were at first violently opposed to God.

Is your life under the control of the Spirit of Yahweh God? If not, there would be no regeneration to talk about. Living a life governed by God is the mark of every man of God, everyone who is born of God.

During a packed itinerary in England, D.L. Moody, that great servant of God, was fully booked for evangelistic meetings. One big church invited him to speak at one of their meetings but he declined the invitation because he already had too many engagements. This church felt snubbed. “An invitation from our famous church is a great honor. We invited you but you turned us down.” At a board meeting one person stood up and said, “Since we invited Mr. Moody and he is not coming, I would suggest that he does not have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit. We can invite someone else.” Another brother stood up and asked the chairman, “May I say something?” The chairman said, “Yes, go ahead”. And he said, “I think the reason we invited Mr. Moody is not because he has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit but because *the Holy Spirit has a monopoly on him!*”

That expresses the essence of John 3:8. The wind blows where it wills, and so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit has a monopoly on this person who does whatever the Spirit tells him to do.

### **Fourth mark: Doing righteousness**

We come to the fourth point. I am proceeding according to the order in which regeneration is mentioned in the Johannine writings. 1 John 2:29 says, “If you know that God is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him”.

Again it is not hard to see the basic message: If God is righteous and if we are born of God, it follows that we have His nature. Since righteousness characterizes His deeds, we too “practice righteousness”. “Like father, like son,” goes the saying. In the Greek, “*practice* (or, *do*) righteousness” is in the present continuous tense, indicating ongoing activity.

What does it mean to “practice righteousness”? It is doing what is right in *God’s* eyes. God’s standard of righteousness is offensive to human thinking. Whether it offends us or not will depend on whether we ourselves are practicing righteousness. When Stephen stood up and spoke God’s word in righteousness, his listeners covered their ears while shouting at him (Acts 7:57), then stoned him to death because his life was righteous and theirs were not.

To better understand the meaning of “practice righteousness,” let us consider Acts 10:35 where similar language is

used: “But in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.” The whole account is about God arranging for Peter to meet Cornelius, a God-fearing military officer, a centurion. This eventually led to a momentous event: Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit. Later on, Peter had to explain to his fellow Jews why the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius, a Gentile. In verse 34 he said, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality.” That is absolutely true, for God grants the Spirit to Jews and Gentiles without partiality. In verse 35 Peter explained further why God showed favor to Cornelius: “In every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.”

God accepts you and me not because we speak spiritual-sounding language or have some Bible knowledge, but because we do righteousness, not in our own strength but by God’s enabling power. In other words, God accepts you when you live according to the power He makes available to you. If you keep saying, “Sorry Lord,” over and over, He may stop listening to you because you are not living according to the power He has given you.

God accepted Cornelius because he feared God and did righteousness. What kind of righteousness did he do? Acts 10:3-4 gives the answer. An angel of God appeared to Cornelius in a vision, and called to him, “Cornelius!” Trembling with fear, Cornelius asked, “What is it, Lord?” The angel said, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now dispatch some men to

Joppa, and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter.”

We often think that when God deals with us, there must be something bad in store for us. Why do we have this concept of God? He may want to talk to you to give you good news, even to tell you that your prayers and alms have ascended to God as a memorial before Him!

Do we have a memorial in God’s presence? Cornelius’s memorial was the righteousness he did. There is no reason to think that this situation is unique to Cornelius. The righteousness you do will also stand as a memorial before God, reminding God of you and your deeds. Our God is a God who is concerned about our deeds, good or bad (cf. “I know your deeds” occurs three times in Revelation 3 alone, in verses 1,8,15). Would to God that we have more memorials up there, so that He may remember our deeds—and us!

If you want God to remember you, start building a memorial through prayer and almsgiving. Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment, was a devout man who feared God with his whole household. He gave much alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually (Acts 10:1-2). He gave alms to the poor with liberality, not being one to drop a miserly few coins into the charity box.

Giving to the needy is an important ministry of the people of God. It is a concrete expression of love and prayer. On the spiritual level and on the practical level, Cornelius was not found wanting. A memorial of his deeds stood in



God's presence, and God sent the apostle Peter to him so that he and his household could receive the Holy Spirit.

As Cornelius did righteousness, so does everyone who is born of God. Every regenerate person will give liberally to the brothers and sisters who are in need. I thank God that a good number of people have encouraged my heart by their practical and generous care for people in need and for their support of the Lord's work. I have no doubts that they have a memorial before God.

But there is the other aspect: *prayer*. As God's people we pray for one another, upholding one another not just materially but also spiritually, not just spiritually but also materially. The two go hand in hand.

### **Fifth mark: He does not sin**

For our fifth point, we turn to 1 John 3:9, a verse that some have difficulty with: "No one born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

In this generation, no verse is more important to stress than this one. Many churches today say that holiness is optional, unessential, and irrelevant to salvation. For this reason we must proclaim the Biblical call to holiness with yet greater urgency.

Scripture explicitly says, "*No one born of God commits sin.*" These are shocking words. Some Christians water down these words, but I don't have that kind of "boldness". I dare

not water down or distort God's Word. That statement is made without any ambiguity: "No one born of God commits sin." When we are born of God, we will not sin deliberately or continuously.

Paul teaches the same, as we have seen. Romans 6 repeatedly says that we have been freed from the control of sin: we are no longer slaves to sin (v.6); he who has died is freed from sin (v.7).

If our lives show no evidence of holiness, it means that we haven't become new persons even if we profess to be Christians. But when we are born anew, the new life in us causes us to lose the desire to sin, and we find ourselves no longer under the compulsion to sin. When these two things are in place—no desire to sin combined with freedom from the compulsion to sin—is there any reason for not living in holiness?

It doesn't mean that we are absolutely sinless. Some people read the statement, "No one born of God commits sin," to mean, "The one born of God is absolutely sinless." The regenerate person is not perfectly sinless in the sense of being unable to sin. Was Adam sinless? He was sinless for a time, but only in the sense of not having committed sin. But he was not *absolutely* sinless or *absolutely* perfect. The fact that he eventually fell into sin proves it.

A newborn baby in the cradle has never sinned, and is as sinless as Adam was. But the baby has the potential to sin insofar as he has flesh (just like Adam). As he grows up, sooner or later he will commit actual sin. The newborn baby,

like Adam, has a body of flesh that inclines him to sin. So long as we are in the flesh, we will be tempted to sin. We will never be absolutely perfect or sinless so long as we remain in this body of flesh.

He who is born of God can still sin if he chooses to, but he does not have to. If his new nature, which is empowered and governed by the Holy Spirit, is the dominant factor operating in his life, he cannot sin because, unlike our old nature, *the new nature has no desire to sin, for it is God's own nature in us* (2Pet.1:4).

John says, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God”. God’s seed abides in us when we are new people in Christ. A seed carries life—in this case, God’s life—in the divine nature implanted in us by His Holy Spirit.

A seed grows when the conditions are right. In 2 Peter 1:4-8 we see this very thing in regard to the divine nature in us. Peter teaches us to encourage the growth of this “seed” in us. If we follow the principles summed up in verse 8, the qualities of the divine nature in us will be “increasing” (the Greek word *pleonazō* πλεονάζω also means “growing” or “multiplying”), and we won’t be “unfruitful”.

Justification is not merely the declaration of righteousness by which God forgives us. That is only one part of justification. The other part is God’s imparting His nature to us, making us righteous. Or, as in 1John 3:9, God’s implanted “seed” abides in us.

If we accept one part of the doctrine of justification but omit the other part, we will get into serious problems. The two must never be separated. God forgives us our sins, but He also makes us righteous. He does this by giving us His Holy Spirit and by putting His own nature in us. This is why the regenerate Christian triumphs over sin consistently, and lives the joyful and meaningful Christian life.

### **Sixth mark: The evil one does not touch him**

We have something more to thank God for. The born-again Christian enjoys a two-fold protection against sin: an inward protection and an outward protection. Internally, the true Christian has God's nature and God's Spirit. Externally, he is protected from the attacks of the evil one:

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but he who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him. (1John 5:18)

The first half of the statement reminds us that the new man in Christ does not sin. The second half tells us that the Lord Jesus himself ("he who was born of God") protects him from the devil. That is double assurance! Internally we have God's righteous nature; externally we are protected by Jesus himself. It reminds us of Zechariah 2:8: "He who touches you, touches the apple of His eye."

Why is Jesus here referred to as “he who was born of God”? That is because the new man in Christ is also referred to as one who is “born of God”. Both Jesus and his disciples are “born of God”; they have this vital reality in common.

To be born of God is to be His son. Jesus is called “Son of God” and believers are called “sons of God”. *The disciple shares the nature of Jesus his Lord.*

God protects us day and night, physically and spiritually. If it weren't for God's protection, I could have died on at least three occasions in the past two years. Yet each time He brought me through without injury, not even to a strand of hair on my head. I am sure that many of you have had similar experiences.

We need the Lord's protection because Satan seeks to destroy those who are born of God, just as he sought to destroy the infant Jesus. But his machinations were foiled, for God safeguards His people physically and spiritually.

### **Seventh mark: Love**

Lastly, 1 John 4:7 says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” The true Christian experiences love flowing from his or her heart like a river of living water. We reserve this important subject for a fuller discussion in a later chapter (25).

Are we born of God? Do we know the living God? Are these seven marks of regeneration real in our lives?



## Chapter 6



# RENEWAL

**R**enewal is an important concept in the New Testament. In Colossians 3:9-10 we read:

Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on *the new self who is being renewed* to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.

“Do not lie to one another.” For people of the world, the practice of lying is so ingrained that it becomes a habit of the mind. People lie whenever it is to their advantage. But when we become new people in Christ, this is one of the evil habits that must be removed in the process of renewal. Christians are sometimes tempted to lie because they want others to think better of them than they really are.

In God’s eyes, lying is not a minor misconduct. Its seriousness is seen in the fact that no liar will gain entry into the heavenly city, New Jerusalem, for “no one who practices

abomination and lying shall ever come into it” (Rev.21:27). Notice that “abomination” (a word generally associated with idol worship, which God detests) and “lying” stand on the same level. Far from being a minor sin, lying, which is untruthfulness or deceit, is dangerous enough to rob us of a place in New Jerusalem.

### **Wrong notions about sin**

When discussing the serious matter of sin, it is of the greatest importance for us to have an accurate understanding of it. For this reason, it is important to be sure that any discussion of sin is based on *definitions of sin according to Scripture*, not definitions according to Christian moral teaching or tradition, or else people will be burdened with a sense of guilt over something that the Bible does not define as sin. There is often a vast gulf between the Bible’s definition of sin and the understanding of sin held by many Christians.

In some Christian circles, taking a glass of wine is considered sin. This definition is unbiblical. While we do not encourage people to drink, we must also be faithful to God’s word. Nowhere in Scripture is drinking a glass of wine declared to be a sin. John’s statement, “No one who is born of God practices sin” (1Jn.3:9), must not be twisted to mean, “No one who is born of God drinks wine.” These are not equivalent except in the thinking of legalistic Christians.

Some Christians say it is a sin for women to wear short skirts, as if John had said, “No one who is born of God wears



short skirts.” While we do not promote short skirts, we must be true to God’s word. It may be true that wearing short skirts is immodest, but would it be Scriptural to ban all swimwear on the same grounds?

Yet the same people who frown upon immodest clothing do not seem to consider rudeness, arrogance, inconsiderateness, loss of temper, or slanderous speech, as sin! Some who are particular about external things (and would never be seen buying a newspaper on Sunday) are not half as particular about the spiritual condition of their hearts. We are reminded of Jesus’ words:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. (Mt.23:23)

But there is an important difference: at least the scribes and Pharisees obeyed the requirement to pay their tithes. Yet some Christians, who may be meticulous about external things, don’t consider themselves to be under any obligation to give a tithe or, for that matter, anything at all, as an offering to God. Hence, there are Christians who are not even on the level of the scribes and Pharisees! We need to heed Jesus’ warning: “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt.5:20).

Man-made definitions of sin give people a sense of guilt over things which are not defined as sin in Scripture. I know of people who consider drinking tea or coffee a sin!

## **Wrong notions about sex**

Some Christians feel guilty about their sexual desires. Whether these desires are right or wrong depends on how they are handled and expressed. Nothing in my study of Scripture indicates that sexual desire is intrinsically sinful. Yet Augustine regarded sexual desire as something bad or even evil, and used the term *concupiscence* (with strong connotations of lust) in this connection. In this kind of thinking, a young and healthy person would inevitably be considered bad because he or she would most certainly have sexual desires.

Let us be frank in discussing sex, or we will complicate the matter. It is natural for a young and healthy person to think about sex from time to time and perhaps even quite often. To deny this would be ludicrous. It is equally ridiculous to say that Scripture regards any thought of sex as sinful. We don't find that anywhere in Scripture.

*Uncontrolled* sexual desire is, of course, sinful. But sexual desire is not sinful in itself. Right from the beginning, in Genesis, God created human beings as male and female, and intended that they marry and be united as one flesh. How could that be done if they had no sexual desires or if sexual desires are sinful? Not only are sexual desires not evil in

Scripture, Paul even says that husband and wife ought not to deprive each other except for a short time for the purpose of prayer (1Cor.7:5).

The idea that sexual desire is undesirable—or even bad—has led to the notion that the unmarried state is holier than the married state. This kind of thinking has insidiously pervaded some sectors of the church. But it must be rejected because it creates unnecessary guilt complexes that hinder the spiritual life. We must not feel guilty about thinking of sex in a proper, Spirit-controlled way.

You may find it surprising to speak of a Spirit-controlled way of thinking about sex, but that is entirely possible. Meditate on Genesis and on God's purpose in the sexual union, and if you know how to think on the spiritual level, it can draw the heart closer to God. Consider how many devotional and spiritual books have been written on the Song of Solomon. It is spiritually edifying to meditate on God's purposes in creating male and female. Nothing that God does is shameful. Do not let Satan claim sex as his territory when it was God who created sex in the first place.

Having said that, it must be pointed out that any ungodly, uncontrolled, licentious, pornographic or depraved thinking about sex is sinful. Sex must never be separated from love. When sex is separated from genuine self-giving love, it degenerates into self-gratifying lust.

We must unlearn our man-made, pseudo-religious thinking, and learn to appreciate the things that God included in His creation. Think about sex in a pure and holy way. As

Scriptures says, “To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled” (Titus 1:15).

I am saying all this because many young people have come to me with feelings of guilt for having thought about sexual relationships. They wonder if they are regenerate because 1 John 3:9 does say, “No one who is born of God practices sin ... he cannot sin because he is born of God”.

Brothers and sisters, if you think about sex in a Spirit-controlled way, and meditate on God’s beautiful purposes for humankind, you have not sinned; your thinking is under control. You need not reject all sexual thoughts and desires as sinful. Of course, if you are thinking of adultery or fornication or illicit sexual relationships, then you are sinning.

There are many young people in the church, so we must be frank about this topic because it has to do with regeneration and renewal. No one should feel that he or she is unregenerate for having thought about sex, when he or she is in fact regenerate and doing what is perfectly normal in a healthy person.

Traditional views of sin are often at variance with Biblical definitions of sin. Already in the second and third centuries in church history, a strong tendency began to develop in Christian thinking which regarded the sexual relation as essentially bad or even evil. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), whose negative view of sex derived partly from his personal struggle with his own sexual desires, endorsed this view and gave it a stamp of authority. He was an influential teacher

and the leader of the church in the North African city of Hippo. His views were accepted by a substantial part of the Western church.

Many people, like Augustine, see sexual desires as a deadly threat to their own spiritual lives. On the other hand, there are also many for whom sexual desires pose no danger. Our personal experiences will inevitably affect the way we think about a particular thing, but what is true for us must not be generalized into a universal truth. It is Scripture and not personal experience alone that is determinative of how we ought to think in regard to any subject.

We reject the negative view of the sexual relationship because this view is contrary to God's Word. Don't be trapped in an unjustified guilt that enslaves you and leaves you wondering if you are regenerate or not. Turn to the Word of God at all times, and check with Scripture whether your words or deeds are sinful or not. Don't be swayed by human opinion and tradition. We need to bear this in mind when considering the subject of *renewal*.

## **Paul speaks of “renewal” in a surprising way**

As regards the Christian life, Paul speaks of a new beginning but also of renewal. As we have seen, he speaks of two things: “the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Regeneration is the initial event in the Christian life, whereas renewal is the process that follows it. Regeneration, then, is the starting point of renewal.

Many Christians are somewhat familiar with the concept of *regeneration*, albeit often with a flawed understanding of it. The concept of *renewal*, by contrast, is virtually unknown to Christians despite the fact that renewal is an important concept in Biblical teaching.

We recall (in chapter 3 of this book) that Paul uses two related Greek words for renewal: the verb *anakainoō* (renew) and the noun *anakainōsis* (renewal).<sup>16</sup> Something is remarkable about Paul's use of these words: *These two words did not exist in all the extant Greek literature prior to Paul!* And that is an immense body of literature.

Equally surprising, the Greek literature prior to Paul already had an established word for "renew" (*anakainizō*, ἀνακαινίζω), *yet Paul did not use this word at all!*

How do we explain this? Why didn't Paul use the established word for "renew"? And why did he choose two new words which hitherto had not appeared in Greek literature? This unusual choice of words must have been intentional because Paul knew the Greek language well.

Some Greek scholars like Moulton and Milligan believe that these two words, the verb *anakainoō* and the noun *anakainōsis*, were coined by Paul himself. This is certainly

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<sup>16</sup>The first is used in, "Our inner man is being renewed day by day" (2Cor. 4:16) and in, "Put on the new self which is being renewed" (Col.3:10). The second is used in, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom.12:2) and, "the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

plausible, and it would indicate that the concept of renewal must have been important to Paul.

This fascinated me, so I investigated the established word which Paul does *not* use (*anakainizō*), and found out that it occurs three times in the Septuagint.<sup>17</sup> When we examine its usage, we see that *anakainizō* basically means to return to an original state from which one had fallen. It is a restoration to a former, more desirable state, which has since been altered, lost, ruined, or destroyed. Paul does not use this word.

An instance of this word in the LXX is found in Lam.5:21 where Jeremiah prays, “*Restore us to Thee, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew (anakainizō) our days as of old*”. “Renew our days as of old” is a plea for a return to a former state which is better than the present state. In effect Jeremiah is praying, “Restore us to the state we were in before our nation was destroyed by our enemies and our people were exiled by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Renew us, O Lord, to the days when we were safe in the land of Israel before Jerusalem was destroyed. Restore us so that the Temple may be rebuilt.”

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<sup>17</sup> The Septuagint (LXX) is an important Greek translation of the Old Testament. The three occurrences of *anakainizō* in the LXX are Psalm 102:5; 103:30; Lam.5:21. In English Bibles, the two verses in the Psalms are 103:5 and 104:30, due to a slight difference in the verse numbering system.

**(1) Renewal is not a return to Adam's original state**

Paul does not use the established word *anakainizō*, but uses two new words instead. There must have been a compelling reason for his unusual choice of words, and this would help us understand what Paul means by renewal.

In not using the established word *anakainizō*, Paul is saying that renewal is not a return to an original state of affairs, not even to the state before the fall of man, when Adam sinned. *The renewal that Paul talks about is something totally new.* It is not a restoration of something old, not even of the Garden of Eden. Paul has in mind a complete renewal: a new birth, a new person, a whole new creation, which must surely include new heavens and a new earth.

In the work of salvation, God is not restoring us to Adam's original state or the way things were before he fell, but to a new spiritual existence that Adam did not know.

Try to capture Paul's God-given vision. Many theologians speak of a return to Adam's original state as if that is the hope and substance of our salvation. But Paul is telling us, "My friend, your vision is too small. God through Christ has achieved something far greater than the forgiveness of our sins and a return to Adam's state before the Fall. He has something better for you. You were once in Adam and were like him, but *Christ has redeemed you so that you may be like Christ, not like Adam.*"

Have we caught the vision? Do we see why Paul's heart burned with a passion to preach the gospel where it hadn't been preached before, be it Spain or anywhere else? We lack



fire when we lack vision. Our vision is so limited that we are content to be restored to Adam's state before he sinned, whereas God's plans are far grander.

## (2) "Renew" is in the passive voice

We note a few things about the two words that Paul uses, *anakainoō* and *anakainōsis*. We have already noted that these could have been coined by Paul himself, and that this would reveal the importance of renewal in his teaching.

The second observation is that Paul uses the verb *anakainoō* in the *passive* voice (2Cor.4:16; Col.3:10), never in the active or middle voice. That Paul uses "renew" only in the passive shows that *renewal is something that God accomplishes in us*. We cannot renew ourselves. That is why Paul speaks of being "saved by grace". Grace is God's renewing power that comes into our lives, making us new people. Therefore any teaching of salvation by works must be rejected. We can reform ourselves, but never renew ourselves. We must not confuse reform and renewal. Self-reform is making improvements here and there, even moral improvements, but that is hardly any more significant than making New Year's resolutions.

The Bible speaks of renewal, not reform. It speaks of a recreation in which God recreates and remakes us. Only God's power in all its wisdom, glory and grandeur can achieve this. God's creative power is magnificently displayed in the universe. But Paul would say to us, "Yes, that power is

wonderful, but there is a power far more glorious: God’s power to recreate and to renew—to make a person new.”

Now we see why Paul uses *anakainoō* in the passive voice. Renewal is accomplished by God through His Holy Spirit. Titus 3:5 speaks of “renewal by the Holy Spirit”. We cannot be regenerated or renewed except by the Spirit of God.

### **(3) “Renew” is in the present tense**

The third observation is that Paul uses the verb *anakainoō* in the *present* tense. Combining this with the previous point, the verb is always used in the *present passive*.

The present tense shows that renewal is a *present* event, not a past event or an exclusively future event. At the present, right now, we are being renewed and in the process of being saved. In the Bible, salvation is not a once-for-all event but an ongoing process. That’s why Paul speaks of salvation in several tenses: the perfect tense (we have been saved), the present tense (we are being saved) and the future tense (we shall be saved). In the past we were saved at regeneration, but now we are in the process of being saved (renewal), and are heading towards a future completion of salvation.

Paul speaks of salvation in all three tenses. An example of the perfect tense is, “By grace *you have been saved* through faith” (Eph.2:8). Examples of the present tense are, “To us who are *being saved*, it is the power of God” (1Cor.1:18), and “We are to God a fragrance of Christ among those who are *being saved*” (2Cor.2:15). An example of the future tense

is, “Much more, having been reconciled, *we shall be saved* by his life” (Rom.5:10). The statement, “Now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed” (Rom.13:11) shows that salvation is a process that has its final future consummation in view.

## Regeneration, then renewal

The church today tends to stress regeneration (the new birth) to the exclusion of things beyond it. Many Christians think that salvation is fully accomplished at regeneration, yet Paul sees regeneration as the *starting point* of salvation. The newly regenerated person is just a newborn infant who must go through a process of growth called *renewal*. Salvation is not just about the new birth but also renewal, just as human life is not just about physical birth but also growing up to physical maturity.

If you have been born again, right now you should be in the process of renewal. Picture the Christian life as a timeline whose starting point is regeneration. When you pass that point, you cross over from death to life, and become a Christian. But regeneration is just the starting point, when you are a newborn baby. In the ongoing process of renewal, you go from infancy to maturity:

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a **mature man**, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13)

Our church does not give out baptismal certificates (unless required for official purposes) because the new birth is the starting point, not the completion, of the new life. I was once in a church in which the pastor gave out baptismal certificates that had red ribbons like those of graduation diplomas. He would call out a name, and someone would come forward to receive a certificate with congratulations. I was asking myself, “Is this a graduation ceremony?”

### **Renewal is vital for survival**

The new birth is only the starting point, and there is still a long way to go before we reach spiritual maturity. How important is it to grow to mature manhood? It is like asking, “Is it important for a baby to grow physically?”

Remember this important fact: Unless you grow, you may not be able to survive. Scripture says that we need to keep on growing towards maturity; this is absolutely essential if we are to survive spiritually. Many have accepted Jesus Christ by raising their hands, and some got baptized, but many didn't survive because they didn't grow.

In some cases, they didn't have life in the first place. Without life there would be no growth to talk about. An inanimate object such as a stone cannot grow, but a seed can grow because it has life. If you aren't growing, either you don't have life, or you don't know what it means to live as a Christian.

The verse under discussion, Ephesians 4:13, talks about becoming a “mature man” and about the “stature of the fullness of Christ.” But what will happen if we don’t move on to maturity? The answer is found in the next verse:

We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming. (Ephesians 4:14)

Those who remain in spiritual infancy will have great difficulty surviving. Paul is concerned that we should “no longer be children,” but that we grow to maturity. Children are tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, being unable to discern who is speaking the truth and who is speaking falsehood. Someone tells them something and they accept it, but when they hear a different teaching, they are confused. Many Christians cry out, “We’re confused. One person says one thing, and another says another thing. Who’s speaking the truth?” They are tossed about by every wind of doctrine.

The word “tossed” comes from the Greek *kludōnizomai* (κλυδωνίζομαι), which means to be tossed about by the waves of the sea. The waves toss you this way and that way, in every direction. You are in a precarious situation, clinging to something for dear life.

Paul chose the word “tossed” advisedly because he was familiar with shipwreck (2Cor.11:25). He knew what it was like to be tossed about by surging waves. He had seen boats being smashed to pieces. He almost certainly knew how to

swim, for he might not have survived so many shipwrecks if he didn't. There were no life jackets in his day, so presumably he would have to swim or cling to a piece of wood. Paul knew what it was like to bob up and down, moving to and fro, in angry waters. He survived by God's grace. Those who want to preach the gospel should perhaps take up swimming lessons!

Paul's experiences of shipwreck had left such a deep impression on him that he speaks of those who make "shipwreck of their faith" (1Tim.1:19). He is concerned that newborn babes in Christ should grow out of infancy and avoid spiritual disaster.

## **Spiritual growth**

In the new birth—the starting point of the Christian life—you become a babe in Christ. But remaining in spiritual infancy will leave you in a precarious position. A baby is dependent on those around him. His mother cares for him, his father cares for him, his brothers and sisters care for him. But what will happen to him if those around him are themselves blown about by different winds of doctrine? His situation would be extremely perilous.

Paul's concern about spiritual growth is seen in what he writes to the churches. For example, he says in Colossians 1:28-29:

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect

(or mature) in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. (NIV)

Why does Paul toil so hard to present every man mature or perfect in Christ? Today we are only concerned to get people converted, then we leave them on their own. In many cases, if the new converts get so much as one follow-up session, they could be considered fortunate. In most cases, they get no solid teaching that helps them grow.

This is in stark contrast to the apostle Paul, who strives with all the energy that God mightily inspires in him, to present to God every person fully grown in Christ. He knows that growth is vital for survival, and that the infant mortality rate in the spiritual life is alarmingly high if there is little or no growth.

Many are uncomfortable with the fact that the Bible states, quite explicitly, that maturity is vital to salvation. No assurance of salvation is given to those who have no desire to grow in Christ, being content to remain in spiritual infancy. 1Peter 2:2 says, “Like newborn infants, desire the pure spiritual milk, so that you may grow by it *for your salvation*” (HCSB). This translation is a faithful rendering of the Greek original text, “*That you may grow up to salvation*” (cf. ESV).

Salvation is something that we “grow up” to. In other words, we must grow spiritually in order to attain our final and complete salvation. This finds an echo in Ephesians 4:13 which says that we are to grow or progress in the body of Christ (v.12): “until we all ... *become mature (teleios,*

‘complete, perfect’), attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (NIV).

The statement in 1 Peter 2:2 about growing up to salvation is so clear and striking that some copyists, perhaps because of their theological bias or predilection, were disturbed enough about it to delete the words “to salvation”. Was it because they were uncomfortable with the teaching that it is those who press on to maturity, and thus become mature, who will be saved? <sup>18</sup>

We hope that the omission was due to a copying error and not an intentional tampering with the text of Scripture. Even so, the error is serious, as can be seen from the fact that the words “to salvation” in 1 Peter 2:2 does not appear in the King James Version (which is based on the Textus Receptus; cf. footnote). For many centuries Christians who only had the King James Bible never knew of the existence of those important words, nor had the opportunity to grasp their significance for salvation.

When Paul says, “that we may present everyone *mature* in Christ” (Col.1:28), the Greek word translated “mature” is the same Greek word for “perfect”. In fact, it is translated as “perfect” in most of the major versions. Hence Paul is simply but vigorously implementing in the church the

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<sup>18</sup> “Textus Receptus, following L [9<sup>th</sup> century] and most minuscules, omits εἰς σωτηρίαν [to (or, into) salvation] either through an oversight in copying or because the idea of ‘growing into salvation’ was theologically unacceptable.” *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, B.M. Metzger, United Bible Societies, 1971.



Lord's instruction in Matthew 5:48: "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*"

"Be perfect" is an imperative. *Perfection or maturity is not optional.* We cannot say, "I'm happy to be saved but I won't press on like the over-zealous Christians or fanatics who have gone into the full-time training to serve God, the same people who study the Bible from morning to night. It's better to remain an ordinary Christian, because if I read too much of the Bible, I won't be able to see straight!"

## **How to grow**

To grow, we must "*long for the pure milk of the word*" (1Pet. 2:2), which is the word of God. We must study the Bible diligently *with our hearts*, not only with our heads, to grow to maturity.

There are two reasons for this. First, God's word teaches us how to discern right and wrong, righteousness and sin. Second, God's word shows us what Christ is like. We cannot grow into the "stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph.4:13) unless we know what Christ is like.

The other aspect of growth is seen in Ephesians 4:12-16: *We grow through the church.* In fact the whole passage is about the growth of the body of Christ, the church. Relevant statements include: "the building up of the body of Christ" (v.12); "the fullness of Christ" (v.13); "we are no longer to be children" (v.14); "we are to grow up in all aspects into

him” (v.15); “the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (v.16).

In Paul’s teaching, the church is the *primary* means of growth. Anyone who doesn’t know how to fellowship with his brothers and sisters in Christ, or who stays away from them, will have great difficulty in growing. The members who together constitute the church, like the members of a human body, grow together. In that process we build up one another; I build you up, you build me up. That is why living and working as a team is so effective for growth. If we cannot commit to one another in a church, or in a team within the church, we won’t learn to commit at all. Without mutual commitment we won’t grow in the Christian life, and our spiritual future will be bleak.

Ephesians 4:16: “From Christ the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (NIV). This body is the body of Christ, the church.

### **Why “total commitment”?**

God renews us by His grace, a grace that becomes effective through faith (Eph.2:8). Hence it requires faith on our part. We don’t just sit back and say, “God will do everything.” God saves us indeed, but not without our cooperation. We are “God’s fellow workers” (1Cor.3:9; cf. 1Thess.3:2). Cooperation with God is an expression of faith.

Because the meaning of faith is so often misunderstood today, let us consider why “total commitment” is useful as a definition of faith. Of course, we are not obliged to use only these two words to define faith. We can use synonymous terms such as “unconditional commitment” or “unlimited commitment” or “unreserved commitment” instead of “total commitment”. Nor are we obliged to use “commitment”. We can use more traditional words such as “submission” or “obedience”. Terms such as “unlimited submission” or “unconditional obedience” or “total response” essentially mean the same thing. We are concerned about the *substance* of the definition, not merely the words themselves.

More importantly, we can define Biblical faith in terms of commitment because that definition is *lexicographically correct*, i.e., correct according to the dictionary meaning. S.C. Woodhouse in his well-known *English-Greek Dictionary* lists *pisteuein* (πιστεύειν, infinitive of πιστεύω *pisteuō*) as a definition of “commit”.

*Pisteuō* is the common Greek word for “believe,” “have faith,” “have confidence” in someone or something, “to trust” or “entrust” (or “commit”) something or oneself to another person. These definitions can be found in any standard Greek-English dictionary. Like many common words, *pisteuō* has a fairly wide range of related meanings in popular usage. Besides those already mentioned, it can also mean “confide in, rely on” a person or thing; “to comply, obey”; “feel sure or confident” about something (Liddell-Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon, Abridged, Oxford, 1972).

## Two radically different kinds of “believing” or “faith”

There is another reason for using the word “commit”. We need to distinguish two radically different things which are called “faith” or “belief” today. The failure to distinguish the two will result in great confusion. Here is an example: If you tell me it is snowing outside, I might say, “Really? I believe you. I believe it’s snowing outside.” But the snowfall makes no difference to me because I am not going out anyway. I believe you, but the snowfall has no impact on my life. It does not matter to me, and does not require any practical response.

If anyone thinks that this kind of believing or faith will save him, then he doesn’t understand the Bible’s teaching. Many Christians say, “Yes, I believe that Jesus died for my sins and rose again.” You believe all these things and think that you have faith. Yes, it is some kind of faith, but it is not saving faith, for *it requires no response on your part*. It is like saying, “Yes, I believe it’s snowing outside.” You accept it, and accept it sincerely, but it has no practical effect or impact on your life. If he is right about the snow, fine. If he is wrong, it doesn’t matter. It costs you nothing whatever to believe him. There is no danger, risk, or cost involved in believing it. Go ahead and believe it!

This kind of “faith” is not saving faith, as is well known among New Testament scholars, yet many Christians generally are unaware of this. This kind of faith is called “intellectual assent”. If you tell me it is snowing outside, I

intellectually assent to your statement, but that is not saving faith (see footnote 4 in chapter 1 of the present book for faith as total commitment in NT scholarship).

### **Commitment is the kind of faith that God calls for**

Saving faith is a faith that expresses itself in *commitment*. Suppose that somebody rushes in and shouts, “The church building’s on fire!” You look around and you say, “I don’t see any fire or smell any smoke.” But the person continues shouting, “The church’s on fire!” That declaration calls for a response. It would be ludicrous for me to say, “Okay, it’s on fire. Please let me return to my cup of tea.” The statement, “The church’s on fire,” means in effect, “If you don’t get out, you will die!” It calls for a total response. It is a matter of life and death. If I truly believe the statement, I will run for the nearest exit. Commitment is essentially “faith working” or “faith expressing itself” through action (Gal.5:6).

That active total response is commitment. It affects the way I live, the way I think, the way I behave. Saving faith is a response of commitment to what someone has said. You are not saved simply by believing intellectually that Jesus came into the world; the devil believes that too. Neither are you saved simply by believing that Jesus died for your sins; the devil believes that too (cf. James 2:19). Intellectual faith makes no difference to your life whereas saving faith is a wholehearted response to God’s call which changes your life.

If we understand the statement, “He died for my sins” as signifying “I must sin no more,” then we are responding in commitment. We make a committed response when we say, “Jesus died for my sins; therefore I repent of my sins.” You heard a statement, and you made a commitment.

Why do we use the word “total” as in “total commitment”? It is because Scripture repeatedly teaches a total response: “You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, and *all* your soul, and *all* your mind, and *all* your strength” (Mk.12:30,33; Mt.22:37; Lk.10:27; Dt.6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 30:6; Josh. 22:5). If you prefer “all” to “total,” feel free to say, “all commitment”. That might not be natural English but at least the concept is Scriptural. How can we respond with anything less than total commitment to God “who did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom.8:32)?

In fact “commitment” means “total commitment”; “total” simply brings out what is already in “commitment”. If I make a commitment to do something, either I do it or I don’t. There are no half measures. If I don’t do it, I have failed in my commitment. If I do it, I do it totally. If I agree to install four wheels on your car but I install only three, I have not fulfilled my commitment to you. Commitment by definition means that you keep your word completely. “Total” is added to ensure that this essential character of commitment is not overlooked, since people often use words in a devalued way.

Let us summarize: To the confusion of many Christians, “believe” (and “faith”) can mean two radically different things. In both cases, the word “believe” is correctly used according to the lexical (dictionary) meaning of the word, but one has to do with saving faith, and the other does not. To differentiate between them, we speak of saving faith as “total commitment”.

## **The meaning of Biblical words derives from their use with reference to God**

There is another important fact about understanding key words in Scripture, namely, that their meaning cannot be fully established solely on the basis of lexical definitions. Take, for example, the word *agapē* (ἀγάπη), “love”. There are several Greek words which can be translated “love,” each with a different nuance. It is well-known that *agapē*, once it was adopted into New Testament, took on a whole new significance which it didn’t have in secular Greek. That new significance derives from the message of the New Testament.

To derive the meaning of *agapē* solely from its lexical definition without regard for the meaning which the New Testament infuses into it, is to misunderstand its intended meaning. That is because God’s love is so far above human love that it cannot properly be understood in purely human terms.

We have no choice but to use the human vocabulary of love when speaking of God’s love. But in so doing we must

constantly bear in mind that it is *God's love*, the unique expression of God's self-giving character, which we are talking about.

Likewise, when speaking of faith or believing, we misrepresent these terms when we use them in a purely secular lexical sense in *special reference to God*. This reference to God as the object of a word is what makes the difference between the Biblical and the secular meanings of the word. I can believe or trust a human being who is trustworthy; but I cannot trust him in the same way and to the same extent as I trust God. Man, even at his best, may fail. But God never fails. How then can one have faith in man and in God in the same way? That is why *the object of faith also defines the content of faith*.

The same is true of love. We are to love God and man. But we don't love them in the same way or on the same level. Not even the dearest and most honored of men can be loved in the same way, or on the same level, as God is to be loved. The same is true of our Lord Jesus, as he made clear when he said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Mt.10:37). If we love anyone more than Jesus, we show thereby that we have failed to recognize who he is, and are unworthy of him.

The same is true of obedience. We are to obey those in authority (Rom.13:1). But if the same authorities compel us to do something against God's will, then "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).



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This principle is true in everything, whether it is faith, trust, love, obedience, or commitment. We are committed to both God and man, but commitment to God always takes precedence.

As for saving faith, we need to bear in mind that it is the eternal God Himself and not just any human being, who in Christ is the Object of our faith. Can any response to the eternal God, our Creator and Redeemer, be anything less than total? Can faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ, be anything less than total trust, obedience, and commitment?




## Chapter 7



# PERFECTION AS MATURITY AND INNER STRENGTH

### **What is the goal of renewal?**

 In the process of our being renewed into Christ's likeness, the goal which the Lord Jesus sets before us is succinctly stated in the words, "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Mt.5:48).

Here Jesus specifically speaks of *perfection*, a problematic concept to many Christians. What do we do with this passage? How do we apply it? Do we quietly walk away from perfection? We cannot do that unless we are willing to discard Jesus' explicit call to perfection.

The call in Matthew 5:48 is for us to be like our Father. "Father" conveys, among other things, a picture of maturity, and with it a depth of wisdom, insight, and discernment, which in the case of human beings is acquired through a lifetime of experience. Sadly, in the case of human fathers,

wisdom doesn't always characterize their fatherhood, not even at an advanced age.

But God the Father certainly embodies every quality that the name "Father" evokes. Not the least of these is the depth of mature wisdom, gracious inner strength, genuine warmth, and pure love that flows from that wisdom. In this chapter we consider perfection from the aspect of spiritual maturity and its inner strength or power.

### **The dangers of spiritual infancy**

Spiritual growth is vital for survival. People who remain in spiritual infancy are in a precarious and vulnerable situation, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:14: "So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles."

The Greek word for "tossed" conveys an image of a ship being thrown up and down, left and right, by powerful waves. The winds and the waves drive the ship ever closer to disaster. Paul is acquainted with shipwreck. He writes, "three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea" (2Cor. 11:25). His unforgettable maritime experiences are reflected in the vocabulary he uses, as when he speaks of people who "have suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith" (1Tim. 1:19).

No one deliberately gets himself shipwrecked. The captain and the crew will struggle to keep the ship afloat,

avoiding the rocks, and throwing the cargo overboard if necessary. Although no one chooses to get shipwrecked, the turbulent winds and waves of erroneous teaching are often powerful enough to shipwreck the faith of those who lack discernment and spiritual maturity.

Although infancy is the necessary first step towards adulthood, it is a dangerous period to be in. We are constantly worried for children because we see the dangers lurking around them which they do not see. Children often cannot discern danger.

The same is true of children in the spiritual sense. When hit by a stormy event in life, they struggle to fight the raging waves, unable to discern the treacherous rocks lurking beneath the surface. Being inexperienced in the spiritual life, they often fail to see the things which, to a spiritually mature person, are obvious dangers.

Even if you warn them, they may still be unable to see the danger below and might not heed your warning. Their eyes gaze longingly at the haven on the shorelines, not realizing that the hidden rocks will smash their boat to pieces before they could ever reach their destination.

### **Infancy and carnality**

Another danger in infancy is seen in 1 Corinthians 3:1: “I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ.” In verse 3 Paul twice describes the Corinthians as people of the “flesh” (carnal

people). Spiritual infancy and carnality usually go together. A young Christian cannot help being carnal because he or she is still in the process of learning to break free from the strong yet subtle influences of the flesh.

If in the ensuing struggle with the flesh, a Christian doesn't gain the victory or doesn't grow out of his carnality, he will find himself in a precarious situation. He may be genuinely committed to God, yet has not broken free from his old way of life and thinking. So long as he is still under the influence of the flesh, he is in peril because he is being tossed about by his conflicting emotions. He is driven relentlessly by his selfish ambitions, desires, cravings, likes and dislikes, fears and anxieties, self-confidence or self-pity. There is a veritable inner storm that threatens the carnal Christian with shipwreck.

The dangers of spiritual infancy are many. It is a stage that we must all go through, but we must not linger there. Some adults are still childish in their thinking. When counseling people with marriage problems, I often observe a lack of maturity in the way they relate to each other. They may be intellectually bright yet are spiritually immature.

I once counselled a couple whose marriage was falling apart. The wife was crying through the whole of two hours. There were two adults before me, yet it seemed as if I were dealing with two children. Physically and intellectually they were adults, but morally and spiritually they were still infants.

It was necessary for me to rebuke this couple because of their wrong attitudes, which if allowed to remain, would destroy their marriage. But on the other hand, they also needed gentle encouragement to make a new start. After a difficult two and a half hours, the marriage was finally saved. They had been thinking of separation or divorce. Many marriages are in turmoil, or are falling apart, because of immaturity.

Outwardly some Christians appear mature because they have been Christians for a long time. But when you talk with them, you may discover that they are spiritual infants who have little or no spiritual perception, direction, or wisdom. It is a pitiful state to be in, and it leaves one vulnerable to shipwreck.

## **The importance of maturity or perfection**

The importance of perfection, understood as spiritual maturity, can be summed up in three points:

Firstly, as we have seen, perfection is vital for *spiritual survival*. To survive, we must grow up and press on towards perfection.

Secondly, we must press on to perfection as a matter of *obedience*. Those who don't press on to perfection are disobeying the Lord Jesus' command. He doesn't offer perfection as an option that we accept or decline, as some Christians suppose. Perfection is the very goal of our life in Christ, by which we are conformed to Christ's perfect image.

Without that goal, our Christian lives would be aimless and directionless, as seen in the lives of many Christians. Many think that the Christian life is about doing this or that for God, not realizing that the first and foremost aspect is *to be* what God wants us to be.

Anyone who thinks that salvation doesn't involve pressing on to perfection, doesn't understand the Lord's teaching. It is a failure to see God's goal and purpose for our salvation: transformation into a new person in Christ. He is "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb.5:9).

Thirdly, whereas the spiritually mature are the spiritually strong, babies are weak and lack wisdom. Their powerlessness leaves them vulnerable to many spiritual dangers. To press on to perfection is to be on the path to *spiritual strength or power*. It is on this path that we find "fathers" with the strength of maturity, and "young men" who are strong (1 John 2:14 and context).

It can be stated categorically that every Christian who has spiritual power is one who is moving towards perfection or maturity in Christ. There is no Christian with spiritual power who is not pressing on wholeheartedly to perfection.

### **Shortcuts to spiritual power**

Many Christians lack spiritual power, so they seek a quick way to get it. But there is no quick and easy way. You cannot get spiritual power by any gimmick or quick fix. If you think



you have a shortcut to power by speaking in tongues, you will be deeply disappointed, as many have discovered for themselves.

Others go to meetings in search of a preacher who will lay hands on them and impart power to them. When they find that they hadn't received the power, they go to another meeting to receive another laying on of hands. Some have done this dozens of times.

These momentary experiences won't give you any long-lasting power. True power comes from a deep, continuous work of God's Spirit within us, not from a quick and easy "spiritual" experience. We must press on to perfection with utmost determination. Then we will not fail to experience God's dynamic power in the Christian life.

Neither is spiritual power gained by getting one theological degree after another. If power could be obtained that way, we should all dash off right now and spend the rest of our days collecting degrees. Do people with theological degrees have spiritual power? Some have knowledge and some have eloquence, but whether they have power is another matter.

Why do we stress spiritual power? Is it because we are power hungry? No, it is because we need spiritual power for survival and victory. In the Christian life you either win or lose, with no middle ground between them. You are for Christ or against him. You are saved or not saved. You are living in victory or defeat. You must choose the one or the other. Is there a third possibility beside victory and defeat?

## **“I have overcome the world”**

Let us widen our vision of strength and victory in the church. The Lord Jesus said to his small band of disciples, “I have overcome the world” (Jn.16:33). That was a bold statement to make because only three chapters later, he was dying on the cross. It is hard to imagine a worse scenario. “I have overcome the world”—such optimistic words from someone who knew he was going to die in a few days’ time.

Was Jesus being overly optimistic? Had he misread his situation? Well, two thousand years later, thousands upon thousands are willing to die for him if forced to choose between death or denying him. Oppressive governments in the past two millennia have discovered this. They underestimated the strength of the church even where it seemed insignificant. They thought they could snuff it out, yet they could not overcome it.

A church which lives by God’s power will actually grow from strength to strength under persecution. It is the “good” times with little or no persecution or hardship that is bad for the church, for there is less opportunity to draw upon, and thus to experience, God’s power. But when Christians are persecuted by the authorities, even imprisoned or thrown into hard labor camps, the church grows stronger.

Being an “overcomer” implies there are things to overcome. The greater the difficulties that need to be overcome, the stronger is he who overcomes them. By contrast, a church that is living in ease and comfort seldom produces overcomers.

## **“I give you power over all the power of the enemy”**

Let us grasp the force of Jesus’ statement in Luke 10:19: “*I give you authority (exousia<sup>19</sup>) over all the power of the enemy.*” The “you” is not limited to the apostles. The statement is addressed to the seventy disciples, but also to us if we are true disciples of the Lord.

The word “all” accounts for every weapon the enemy can muster. Since no power of the enemy can overpower us, would it not mean that we are invincible so long as we live under God’s authority?

God gives us power and authority to carry out His saving work in the world, even in the face of the most determined of hostile powers. The picture of invincibility, through the Spirit’s work and indwelling, is what we need to let God imprint in our hearts and minds. We can be invincible “*because greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.*” (1Jn.4:4)

The Lord Jesus started with twelve disciples, who were still under training when he said to them, “*I give you authority over all the power of the enemy.*” He also had seventy disciples whom we might call “lay” disciples. Not much is known about the Seventy, but we can think of them as “lay”

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<sup>19</sup> This is the same word as in John 1:12, “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right (*exousia*) to become children of God”. We discussed this verse and the meaning of *exousia* in chapter 5 of this book, under the subheading “First Mark: Authority to Be Children of God”.

disciples, given the fact that they didn't accompany Jesus everywhere and at all times. In any case, Jesus spoke those powerful words to the twelve full-time disciples and to the seventy lay disciples alike.

The "enemy" refers to Satan (v.18), who is the devil and the old serpent (Rev.12:9). Satan, together with his "serpents and scorpions," schemes restlessly to devise ways to harm God's people. But the Lord Jesus assures his disciples that not only will he protect them from harm, much more, he will empower them to trample the powers of the enemy under their feet! This is how Jesus' statement reads in Luke 10:18,19:

I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. (NIV)

The word "trample" translates a Greek word that is often used in the context of the crushing and trampling of grapes for wine making. This came to be used as a metaphor for the judgment of the wicked: "Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!" (Joel 3:13). Rev.14:19 speaks of "the winepress of God's wrath," and of being "trampled in the winepress" (v.20; also Rev.19:15).

But the world is never lacking in skeptics and mockers: "Jesus is going to shake the world with twelve guys and seventy nobodies? And do this by making them invincible?!"

If you look carefully at his words, Jesus actually said *more* than that! He will not only make them invincible against *all* the power of the enemy but more than that, he will help them subdue and conquer the enemy so overwhelmingly that it will be like crushing grapes in the wine vat!

And because it is the “nobodies” under whose feet the enemy will be crushed, the power and glory belong to God alone. Let every true disciple rejoice in the fact that “*the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet*” (Romans 16:20).

### **Power for those who press towards perfection**

Happily for us, spiritual power is given to a disciple even before he or she reaches full maturity, or perfection. If that were not so, we would despair of ever attaining to the needed power, and would be resigned to living in constant defeat. Spiritual power would be unattainable if all we could do is gaze at perfection from afar with a telescope, saying to ourselves, “When I finally get there, I might become invincible!” But this notion is mistaken. The Lord’s disciples were not yet fully trained at that time, and their spiritual perception wasn’t all that impressive. Yet it was *to such people* that God gave authority over all the power of the enemy.

So long as we are moving forward in following Jesus, pressing on with determination towards perfection, we will be equipped with the power we need to continue our advance. The power will grow in tandem with our progress

towards perfection. Right now we already have power. It may be limited at this stage, but it is a genuine power that will grow as we press on towards the mark.

Then we will discover that perfection is not as remote today as it was a year ago. When we gaze at the distant horizon, the vast gulf between Christ's perfection and our feeble progress may discourage us. But the fact is that the Lord equips us with the needed power well before we reach perfection, so long as we are moving forward in obedience. Pressing forward is the attitude we need to maintain consistently. As Paul says, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things." (Phil.3:14,15)

Are you pressing forward? If you are, you will be surprised at the power that God gives you to continue your advance. Use that power, and the enemy will fall back. Nothing can stop you from achieving the spiritual excellence or Christ-likeness that God has called you to. You move forward and the enemy will retreat. Resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7). That is the power granted to every true child of God.

What was Jesus' goal in sending his disciples out on a mission? When they returned, they hadn't yet shaken Israel, much less the world. The purpose was to give them a first practical lesson, a foretaste of spiritual warfare and power. He was telling them, "Though you are inadequate, as you move forward, you will know that I have given you the

power you need to be my representatives, and to accomplish what I sent you out into the world to do.” Sure enough, the disciples came back rejoicing (Luke 10:17). We can hear them saying, “Lord, your word is true! We advanced and the enemy fell back. We pressed forward and they fled”.

## **Dream the impossible**

Let us grasp Jesus’ words and capture his vision: We will be invincible and triumphant in spiritual battle through the authority or power which he confers on us to fulfill our mission. That mission is to make him known, to declare the hope of salvation in Christ. No enemy on earth can stop the advance of God’s kingdom. Watch and see, and let that be our dream. When our dreams are inspired by God, they will come to pass as we press on towards the mark.

Many years ago, when we first started the full-time training program in our church—which is to prepare people to go into the world to proclaim Christ—people were asking, “Do we have enough money for the training? How can we support so many people in full-time training and still cover the church expenses?”

All that is history. Some may even wonder, “What was the problem in the first place?” Well, it was a real problem back then. But with the completion of the training two years later, the earlier financial concerns evaporated from our collective memory. We advanced, and the problems fell back one by one.

One day the full-time ministry trainees and I were sitting around a table. We were saying, “Let’s dream a little. One day we’ll go to Israel and visit the geographical and historical settings of the events we read about in the Bible, so that we may gain a fuller perspective of what we have read.” But everyone was aware of the high cost of the trip for an entire team, with airfare and other expenses to cover. But we said we would dream on. And what happened not long afterwards? Our feet were standing in the land of Israel! How wonderful it is to walk with the Lord. When we press forward, the impossible has a remarkable way of coming to pass.

When later full-time trainings were established, no one expressed concerns about the finances any more. Instead they were saying, “Yes, we now have more people to support, but we’ll manage.” The lesson had been learned.

Since then many teams have been trained, two of them with as many as 47 people in them, yet we haven’t heard anyone express anxiety about the finances. We have become so acquainted with overcoming this problem that no one is worried about it anymore. We may be taking too much for granted, and ought to pray more earnestly about it.

## **Casting out demons, healing the sick**

The Lord gives us power, and we will subdue the forces of darkness. There may be times when we will have to cast out demons, which is what happened during the mission of the Seventy (Luke 10:17). “Demons? Are you serious? Cast



them out? I'm scared of them!" If you are walking with God, why should you be afraid of demons? Have we not read in James 4:7 that if we resist the devil, he will flee from us? If the devil himself flees, won't his demons flee too?

We often take for granted that the disciples were able to cast out demons. But it was not so simple for them initially. Have you ever seen an exorcism? Have you ever seen a demon-possessed man acting under the control of a demon? Wait till you see one, and you will know how brave you really are. You may start trembling, and the words, "I give you authority over all the power of the enemy," will be forgotten.

The Lord will ask us to do other things such as praying for a sick person. This too was part of the mission of the Seventy (Luke 10:9). You might ask, "Me, Lord?" But if God moves you to pray for a person, do not refuse. Do we think that sickness is too great an obstacle for the Lord's power? Will we tell him, "Yes, Lord, I know that healing the sick is mentioned in the Bible, but we're living in the 21st century!" Is the 21st century somehow an insurmountable obstacle to God's power?

The first time we pray for a miracle we may be a bit anxious. If we pray for someone and ask him to rise, what if nothing happens? It would be a setback and embarrassment. So we start making excuses: "Lord, I don't want to disgrace your name, so I had better leave him as he is." But when the person is actually healed, we are surprised. So much for our faith and confidence in God's power! How patient is the

Lord with us, people of little faith. Of course, by the time a second person is healed, then a third, we are no longer anxious.

It is crucial, however, to realize that we are to exercise that power *only* in accordance with God's will. We must therefore always live under His lordship. In the case of healing, for example, it is up to God to lead us to the one He chooses to heal according to His own purposes.

Jesus healed many during his earthly ministry, but the number healed amounted to only a small fraction of all the sick people in the land of Israel. Hence healing was not the main purpose of his ministry.

His acts of healing had a *spiritual* purpose. His foremost concern was for man's salvation rather than his physical healing. The acts of healing signified that he who has the power to heal physically is the one who has the power to save people spiritually for all eternity. Jesus affirms this by asking, "Which is easier: to say, 'your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" (Mt.9:5; Mk.2:9; Lk.5:23). Only God's power can do either, or both. It is not more difficult for God to heal through Jesus Christ than to forgive. The cross of Jesus demonstrates that it was far costlier for God to forgive our sins than to heal our physical ailments.

We need to understand these things when we pray for the sick or do any other work through God's power working in us. We must exercise the utmost care in all that we do, to be sure that we are doing it in accordance with His will and never according to our own desires.

Every true child of God will always strive to please Him, and will never misuse the authority that God has entrusted him. Such a person will make every effort to press on to maturity or perfection, which is Christ-likeness.

### **God's work and man's effort**

We must deal with a pitfall along the path to perfection. When we speak of making every effort, some people will find this objectionable, saying, "But this is human works and effort!" as if works and effort are bad. I myself was brought up in this kind of thinking.

Many Christians fail to distinguish between two totally different kinds of works, with the result that they "throw out the baby with the bath water". They talk as if the only works spoken of in the New Testament are the "works of the Law". The apostle Paul refers to this type of works in Romans (e.g. 3:20,28) and Galatians (2:16; 3:2,5,10) in the context of man's *justification* before God, such that no man can be justified before God by the "works of the Law".

But there is another kind of works that Christians ought to do, for God has foreordained that we do them. In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul, having said that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works, goes on to say, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (v.10).

Why did God make of us a new creation in Christ? So that we may be “*created in Christ Jesus for good works*”! Good works are what God created us for. And He foreordained “that we should walk in them” in order to glorify Him. These works are produced by “His power that is at work within us” (Eph.3:20; Col.1:29). Jesus our Lord “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14, NKJV). The good works among His people are mentioned in 1Tim. 2:10; 5:10; 6:18, and elsewhere.

There are “the works of the Law” as opposed to the “good works” which the new life in Christ produces in us, and “which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph.2:10). The failure to distinguish these two different types of works is the cause of the misguided rejection of all works and of the very purpose for which God created us as new persons in Christ. This indiscriminate rejection of all works has led to spiritual disaster; it is a rejection of what God has purposed for those whom He created anew in Christ.

A vital principle in Scripture is the co-relationship between God’s power and man’s effort. First, we must get the order right: God leads, then we follow.

Second, we need to get the *emphasis* right: There is the danger of stressing God’s grace to the exclusion of human effort. But the opposite is equally dangerous: stressing human effort but forgetting that it counts for nothing without God’s grace. Both grace and effort are needed, but

grace always has the precedence, “for it is God who is at work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose” (Phil.2:13, NIV).

We think it is more spiritual to stress God’s role to the exclusion of man’s role, but that dichotomy is spiritually false. If we stress the one to the exclusion of the other, we will be unable to fulfill His preordained purposes for us.

The command “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt.5:48) presupposes our ability to fulfill it. The Lord would not have given this command if he didn’t require us to fulfill it. Many Christians think it is up to God to make us perfect, so we sit back and wait for God to make us Christ-like one day.

The pursuit of perfection requires determination, yet at the same time we must not forget that, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). We are prone to pride, so the Lord keeps us mindful of the fact that human effort alone cannot attain perfection. Yet he commands us to pursue it, always depending on God’s grace. It is a golden balance: Perfection is commanded, so we strive for it. Perfection is beyond human attainment, so we depend on God’s grace for it.

### **Spiritual passivity**

We must never lose that balance. Some Christians, including some Quietists, promote “spiritual passivity,” believing that it is spiritual to say, “God does everything, I do nothing, for

all is of God's power and sovereignty." We could follow this reasoning to absolve ourselves of every responsibility: "I will say nothing except what God wants me to say, and do nothing except what God wants me to do." That may be good or bad depending on what you mean by it.

It is a good thing if we are so close to God that we always hear His direct instruction on what we are to say or do every moment of the day. But what if we have not reached such intimacy with God, or this level of maturity? In this case, we would be obliged to barely speak anything at all—which may not be a bad thing! But it also means that we will end up doing nothing, languishing in passivity. We won't serve God or love our brothers and sisters unless the Lord "inspires" us—as if God hadn't already given us His commands about it, such that we need direct communication from Him before doing anything.

"Spiritual passivity" is deceptively spiritual-sounding. In the last days, even the elect will be deceived, "if possible" <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Some have argued that it is impossible for the elect to be deceived so as to be lost. The "if" in Mt.24:24 is, they claim, purely *hypothetical*. Others admit that the elect can be deceived, but without any danger of being lost. In that case, where exactly is the danger of being deceived? If there is no real danger, what is the point of the warning? If there is no possibility for the elect to be deceived or lost, the prediction would be pointless. Does the Lord give meaningless prophecies? Even as a warning, it is equally pointless if the consequences cannot happen.

What then is the meaning of "if possible"? "If" indicates something conditional: If this is the case, then that will follow. The meaning of Jesus' prediction is not that the elect cannot or will not be deceived, *nor*

(Mt.24:24). The elect won't be deceived unless the teaching is couched in spiritual-sounding language. Only spiritual-sounding statements appeal to the elect. We must press towards spiritual maturity to survive, for it is the mature who can discern good and evil (Heb.5:14). The spiritually immature will be easy victims of spiritual-sounding false doctrines.

### **Fulfilling God's explicit commands**

In fact we don't need special "inspiration" before we get on with doing what we have already been called to do, such as to love God and love the neighbor. If we fail to do these things, will we then plead that we failed because of a lack of "inspiration" from God, and then "pass the buck" back to Him for our failure? All the grace we needed had already been provided for us through God's indwelling Spirit to accomplish that to which He has called us.

The one who presses towards perfection will make it his aim to obey God's commandments, with or without "inspiration," which to a spiritually immature person usually just means a feeling. And what does God command of us? He commands us to love, whether we feel the inspiration or not.

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is it that the elect will inevitably be deceived in the future, but that *under certain conditions* (such as willfully disobeying the Lord) *they can be deceived*. The statement, "We'll go for a walk on Sunday, if possible" does not mean, "It will be impossible for us to go for a walk on Sunday," nor does it mean, "We will certainly go for a walk on Sunday," but it means, "We'll go for a walk on Sunday, if the time is available, if the weather is favorable, and if other conditions make it possible".

Even if I don't feel like loving someone, I love because I am commanded to. We may not have a natural liking for a certain person, yet we will show him concern because of what the Lord commands. We often have to disregard our feelings because they can get the better of us.

Some say that they are not following God because they have not felt any "moving" from Him. What moving are they waiting for? Even if you felt an inner moving, would you be able to discern that it is really from the Spirit of God? You may presume a spiritual discernment that you don't have. Only those who are faithfully pressing forward in Christ will be granted insight by the Spirit to discern one feeling from another. Even so, we can always stick to something reliable: obedience to God's explicit commands in the Bible.

This is not to rule out being moved or led by the Spirit, or to deny the reality of inspiration from the Lord. These are important. But the question is whether we are in the right spiritual condition to discern God's moving in us or to receive the inspiration He wants to give us. If we are not living in obedience, or are not ready to fulfill what He has already commanded, how will we discern His moving?

Jesus says, "Make disciples of all nations" (Mt.28:19). Are we going to wait for an inspiration or feeling before fulfilling that command? It is clear and unambiguous: Go and make disciples! In our church we train people so that they can go out and make disciples. Are we to wait for some kind of feeling first? But if our response is: "Here I am Lord, ready



to do as you have commanded. Please lead me to the people you want me to bring your word to, so that they can become your disciples,” then you can be sure that the Lord will lead you and provide you with the power to accomplish it.

When Paul went on his missionary journeys, he faithfully carried out the command to make disciples of all nations. In the book of Acts we see how the Holy Spirit led him and did amazing things through him as he moved forward in obedience to the Lord’s command.

Pressing determinedly towards the mark means doing what God commands us to do. He has already instructed us in His word, so we don’t need any further “inspiration”. He has told me to love my wife, so I will love her even if she does something that displeases me. I will love her irrespective of my mood. I won’t allow myself to be governed by my feelings, which are unreliable. I will fulfill my duty whether I feel good in the morning or not, knowing that God will give me the grace to fulfill it.

If something doesn’t move, it cannot be steered or guided. You cannot steer a car that is not moving. Likewise, the Holy Spirit cannot guide us if we don’t move in obedience to the explicit commands that God has already given. On the other hand, there are Christians who are moving, but not in obedience to the Lord. They do things their own way, yet want God to bless what they are doing. What they will end up with is a crash, again to use the picture of driving.

## **Striving with all the energy that he inspires in me**

The connection between God's work and man's is seen in Colossians 1:28-29:

We proclaim him (Christ), warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me. (RSV)

This verse shows the relationship between God's work and man's work. *Paul strives* and *God energizes*. What an inspiring picture! Paul presses forward, and God's power empowers him as he moves on. As we obey God, He gives us strength and power. We press towards the mark with all the energy that God mightily inspires within us.

We press on with determination and obedience to God, knowing that His power—inward and outward—will be granted to us: inwardly energizing us, outwardly subduing the power of the enemy, so that nothing will be impossible to achieve: "*Nothing shall be impossible to you*" (Mt.17:20).

Capture the vision. We will get the job done in this generation even if we are like grasshoppers in the face of gigantic challenges and obstacles. The Israelites described themselves as grasshoppers in comparison to the giant Nephilim (Num.13:33). They made the comparison after surveying the land that God had promised them, yet which they were afraid to enter.

Our situation is like that of the Israelites who entered the Land of Promise and saw people who stood head and

shoulders above them. It was in this situation that God said to His servant Joshua, “No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous” (Joshua 1:5,6). “Be strong and courageous” occurs three times in this short passage (vv.6,7,9), indicating the magnitude of the challenges the Israelites had to face.

## Holiness and perfection

The Bible has several synonyms for perfection, one of which is *holiness*. Perfection is holiness. “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt.5:48) is parallel to, “Be holy for I am holy,” or “You shall be holy for I am holy” (Lev.11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; 1Pet.1:16). The command to be perfect as we find it in the Sermon on the Mount is equivalent to the command to be holy given to the Israelites. To be perfect is to be holy; conversely, to be holy is to be perfect.

Several Old and New Testament concepts form an interlocking chain: perfection, holiness, power, victory. These are various aspects of the one central reality. To be perfect as God is perfect means that we are to put on His character, or the character of His Son Jesus Christ. Be Christ-like because Christ is perfect. Be pure because Christ is holy. Be humble because Christ is lowly in heart. Be strong because Christ is mighty.

Our vision is too small. The Lord Jesus wants his disciples to widen their vision and look beyond the circumstances,

even beyond the enemy who is before us, and by faith take hold of God's unlimited grace and power. In this way we, as the body of Christ, reveal his life and proclaim his salvation to the ends of the earth.

## **A holy nation to proclaim God's excellencies**

The Bible has a parallel between Israel and the church. God says,

“If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5-6)

This is applied to the church, the body of Christ, in 1Peter 2:9:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

God calls Israel to be His special possession, a holy nation. How is Israel going to be God's holy nation? By obeying His voice and keeping His covenant.

Holiness has two aspects: *God's calling* and *our response*. We are called to holiness, but holiness is realized only if we respond to the call, just as a holy nation obeys God's voice and responds to His call.

Holiness and obedience are crucial for the victory of God's holy nation by which He is revealed to all nations. A few chapters later, in Exodus 23:22, Yahweh says, "If you will truly obey that angel's voice and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries."

A preeminent example of this, which became well known to the nations of the world, was how Yahweh God dealt with Pharaoh and his hosts, the oppressors of Israel.

Another remarkable example is seen in the case of Gideon (Judges 7) when Israel was facing a formidable enemy in the form of Midian, its allies, and their armies. To convey the magnitude of the enemy's numbers, the ancient historian used the familiar hyperbole of sand on the seashore: "their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore".

In the face of an innumerable enemy force, Yahweh God told Gideon to reduce Israel's forces from 32,000 men to 10,000, then to 300! This was in order that Israel would not exalt herself and boast that, "My own strength has saved me" (v.2). Yahweh was teaching Israel that if they are obedient to Him, they will gain the victory against impossible odds. Gideon obeyed, going forth with the 300 men against the armies of Midian, and God secured for them such a resounding victory as would declare His Name to the nations.

All that we are talking about would be nonsense if God is not real. If He is not real, it would be silly to talk about

invincibility because it would be a make-believe invincibility. Invincibility is possible only with supernatural power. If God is not real, our victory would be a purely human achievement, with perhaps a fifty-fifty chance of winning a battle *if* our forces are evenly matched with the enemy's.

Only if God is real would it be rational to talk about invincibility. Only when God's power is *consistently* manifested through us, either individually or as a church, will the world be obliged to acknowledge that God is real.

### **God's power in nobodies**

The lessons that Yahweh taught Israel in the Old Testament are the lessons that He wants to teach us in the New Testament. There is so much relevant teaching in the Old Testament that we will just look at one more example of the connection between holiness and power and victory. In Deuteronomy 7:6-7 we read:

You are a people holy to Yahweh your God. He has chosen you to be a people for His own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that Yahweh set His love upon you and chose you, *for you were the fewest of all peoples.*

God specially loved Israel not because the Israelites were great but because they were nobodies. *The nobodies of the world are eminently qualified to demonstrate God's power.* If God had demonstrated His power through a nation like

China with its vast population and advanced culture, what would be impressive about that? Israel was, and still is, one of the smallest countries in the world.

God chose this tiny nation, this nonentity in the midst of the great nations of the world. The insignificance of the Israelites—they were “the fewest of all peoples”—is precisely the reason for His choosing them. He demonstrates His power through the weak, and makes known His glory through the lowly. If we are willing to be nobodies, God will be pleased to manifest His power through us too. When we overcome impossible odds, everyone will know that the power must have come from God. That is the wisdom and the beauty of it.

When Israel was invaded by the mighty armies of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, which was then the world’s foremost superpower, what could they do but cry out to Yahweh to save them? The Assyrian armies were ruthless, confident, and unrivalled in strength, and were about to trample helpless Israel into the dust. But Yahweh dealt Assyria a crippling blow in which 185,000 Assyrians were killed in one night (2Kings 19:16-36). God saves the weak and the helpless, so the glory belongs to Him alone.

In Deuteronomy 7:19, Yahweh says,

“... the signs, the wonders, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm, by which Yahweh your God brought you out; so will Yahweh your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid.”

What God had done to mighty Egypt—bringing plagues upon them and destroying their armies—He will do to those who terrify His people. The Israelites may be afraid of their formidable enemies, yet they will see God’s power in their midst if they trust in Him.

If you are living in God’s power, what problems in life cannot be solved? If you are an overcomer in Christ, what relationship problems cannot be solved? Nothing will be impossible to you (Mt.17:20). Those who press on towards perfection will encounter hindrances, opposition, difficulties, and even suffering, but by God’s grace, they will never encounter an insoluble problem.

In these last days, the church as the body of Christ must fulfill her God-given role to manifest God’s saving glory to the nations. We need a deep transformation in Christians as will cause people to say, “Look, the living God is in their midst!”



## Chapter 8



# ARE WE SINLESS AFTER REGENERATION?

The acute problem of post-regeneration sin requires careful study: *Why do Christians sin after they have been born anew?* This question must have crossed your mind from time to time. You may know of someone who has been baptized and says that he has been born of God. You don't doubt the sincerity of his profession, yet you see glaring imperfections in his life, even things that are clearly wrong according to the Bible. You may see this situation even in your own life, and then you ask yourself, "If I am born again, why am I doing the things that are displeasing to God? Why am I sinning even though I have been born anew?"

I would like to examine this matter in the light of 1 John 3:9:

No one born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God (1 John 3:9, NIV)

This verse is crucial for our discussion on perfection (or holiness) in the Christian life (see chapter 5, the fifth mark of regeneration). We cannot talk about renewal and perfection without coming to grips with this important verse. Incorrect exposition could result in dangerous error.

This verse has been interpreted by some Christians to mean the total eradication of sin. When we read statements such as, “no one born of God commits sin,” or “he cannot sin because he is born of God,” we would have to admit that these statements *prima facie* (on the surface, on first impressions) do say that you are absolutely sinless. If you do commit any sin, it logically means that you have never been born of God in the first place. This is the basis of the “eradicationist” theology which teaches that your sinful nature has been eradicated and replaced by the divine nature, making you incapable of sinning.

## **The juridical view of salvation**

Let us backtrack to a more basic question: *What happens to us at salvation?* There are two extreme opinions. One position, accepted by most Christians today, is that salvation is a purely juridical or legal matter. Christ died for us and we die in him in some legal sense. And having died in him in this sense, we are *justified*, and thus freed from the guilt of sin. This definition of justification, which is the one most widely held today, places justification wholly in the domain of *law*.

On this understanding, it doesn't matter whether the justified sinner has *in reality* stopped living as a sinner. It doesn't matter whether an iota of change in his life has taken place, for justification is seen to be a purely legal matter.

You are familiar with this teaching, and it goes something like this: When I first believed in Jesus, a judicial process came into force by which I was forgiven and acquitted of sin. In reality nothing has happened to me, or in me, beyond the fact that I now believe in Jesus. The only difference is that because I now believe, I stand in a new legal position before God. But in real life, I am still the sinner I was before. Hopefully with time and before I die, I might see some moral improvement.

As to why Christians continue to sin, the explanation is simply: "I sin because nothing in my character has changed since I became a Christian." If you ask them whether holiness is essential, the answer will be a resounding "no," because salvation is a purely judicial matter. In their view, it doesn't really matter for salvation whether I become more spiritual or more Christ-like in daily life, though this would be desirable.

In this view, spiritual and moral improvement would still be desirable, but it has nothing to do with my justification, forgiveness, or salvation. It doesn't matter whether you are holy or not. Some even maintain that pursuing holiness is dangerous because it may lead to human effort and salvation by good works; it is safer to refrain from good works, and entrust yourself to the security of a legal position.

## The other extreme: eradicationism

The other extreme position is that the Christian cannot sin at all, for he is perfectly and absolutely sinless. This teaching is popular in the Holiness Movements. They would say, “1 John 3:9 says that no one born of God commits sin. He is absolutely incapable of sinning. You mustn’t water down these words.”

Other Christians try to tone down the statement with this explanation: John is using the present continuous tense (“no one born of God will *continue* to sin,” NIV), hence the statement should be understood as, “No one born of God *habitually* commits sin.” He might sin from time to time, but not *habitually*.

This position, though toned down, is still of a much higher standard than the popular teaching of juridical justification, because a Christian who does not sin *habitually* must evidently be living in holiness most of the time. This higher standard flies in the face of the standard teaching which removes holiness from salvation.

In this view, the Christian doesn’t sin *habitually* because God’s nature (“seed”) abides in him. But this runs into a problem: How is it to be reconciled with the second part of John’s statement (“he cannot sin”)? The first half (“no one born of God commits sin”) can be explained by adding the word “habitually,” but the second half seems to say that Christians are *incapable* of sinning.

Many people find 1John 3:9 problematic. You have probably never heard this verse being expounded in any

church. How do we handle this verse? If we say that a Christian doesn't sin *habitually*, we run into a problem because the same verse says that he "cannot" sin. This seems to short-circuit the "present continuous tense" argument.

We must tread carefully because we could go to one extreme or the other. Some in the early Methodist movements were zealous to promote a doctrine of sinless holiness on the basis of this verse (which John Wesley quoted frequently). The danger is that we could easily shift to an eradicationist doctrine which says that no one who is born of God can ever sin. But how can that be possible unless one is perfectly sinless? There are some with more zeal than knowledge who claim that they themselves are absolutely perfect, and cannot sin at all.

## **Salvation is not merely legal**

Is it possible for a Christian to sin? As we said, a more basic question is: *What happens to us when we become Christians?* Are we legally forgiven and justified even if we have not been changed in reality? Can we claim to have the Holy Spirit, yet in practice live defeated lives, disgracing God every day? Do we admit that spiritual improvement is good, yet presume it is optional and suitable mainly for ambitious Christians? Do we suppose that ordinary Christians don't have to pursue holiness unless they aspire to?

For the majority, being a Christian involves mainly a change of labels: We were once non-Christians but now we

have a new label. We have taken down the store sign and have put up a new one that says, “Christian”. But inwardly we have not changed. Everything remains in the same old way as it was before.

This is a pathetic picture of Christianity. So, is salvation merely a judicial procedure? When you become a Christian, does God simply say, “Good, you now believe in Jesus. Here is a list of your past sins; I strike a line across them and cancel them”?

Colossians 2:14 does say, “He canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us”. Without a doubt, salvation does have a legal aspect, involving a legal procedure and legal transaction. In justification we are legally acquitted by the Judge and declared forgiven. We were guilty of a multitude of sins, but because Jesus died for us, God the Father declares us acquitted of our sins.

All this is true. The problem begins when we stop there and say that justification is *exclusively* legal and doesn’t require a change from our sinful character. John Wesley avoided this error.

Any church that teaches a purely legal justification is open to the danger of hypocrisy. Without genuine holiness, the church will be powerless. In this teaching, you can go through a legal transaction and remain the same person as before. Your ongoing sins will be covered by Jesus’ bank account because he will continue to service your debt (debt symbolizes sin in the Bible; cf. Mt.6:12, “forgive us our debts”). Christians think they can go on sinning because

Jesus will continue to pay their debts in the future as he did in the past.

It is true that Jesus paid our debts, but is that the whole story? If we have nothing more than a judicial status, how can the church be the light of the world? Is the church today the light of the world (Mt.5:14)? Can we still speak of the glory of the church (Eph.3:21; 5:27)? Would Paul still speak of God's glory in the church if he were to look at our churches today? The church is called to reflect Christ's glory, power and holiness.

### **Acquittal without transformation**

Let me use an analogy to illustrate the gravity of the matter. Let's imagine that you are a drug addict, and one day the police raid your home and finds a cache of drugs. You are hailed before a court of law. Let's imagine that you are fined an enormous sum of money, to the tune of a million dollars, and that the failure to pay it would result in a long jail term. In this highly fictitious scenario, let's imagine that a wealthy benefactor steps in and pays the fine on your behalf. You are now acquitted and forgiven as far as the law is concerned, and are released because someone has paid the penalty on your behalf. That's wonderful! That is the judicial part.

But will the acquittal do you any good if you do not kick your drug addiction? You will be driven back to drugs. And where does that leave you? Won't the sad story repeat itself again and again? Won't you go back to drugs, only to get

arrested once more, hoping that your friend will bail you out again? This becomes an unending cycle.

Is that the sorry picture of the Christian life? Will you keep on saying for the rest of your life, “Lord, I’m sorry I sinned again. Something is compelling me to sin.” Jesus pays the fine, yet you sin again. Is that the abundant Christian life to which Jesus has called us?

If a drug addict has been acquitted through a third-party bailout, has his benefactor really done him a favor? What is the point of being acquitted if I am still in bondage to sin? If salvation is a purely judicial matter, how could we speak of a glorious salvation? If a Christian is still enslaved to sin, he is no better off than a drug addict who is controlled by drugs.

The danger of a *purely* judicial doctrine of salvation should, therefore, be plainly evident for everyone to see. It leaves the Christian still under the control of sin. He still sins by the compulsion of his old nature, and does the evil he doesn’t want to do (Rom.7:19). Like the drug addict, he cannot help but sin because he is being compelled by the addictive power of sin residing in his flesh. “*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*” (Rom.7:24). Mere judicial forgiveness (acquittal) does not solve his root problem. I may thank Jesus for paying my fine, but the root problem is still there. What has been controlling me in the past will continue to control me in the future. I remain a slave of sin.



## Free from the power of sin

But Scripture gives a totally different picture of salvation. From God's word I affirm that salvation, as John Wesley rightly saw, is a salvation not just from the guilt of sin, but also from *the power of sin*. If I haven't been saved from the power of sin, I am not truly saved from sin at all.

We loudly proclaim freedom from the *guilt* of sin, but that only solves one part of the problem. Freedom from guilt is wonderful indeed, but I am not truly saved from sin unless the Lord also frees me from the *power* of sin within me. To put it bluntly, if the Lord does not or cannot release me from addiction to sin, what kind of Savior is he? How then can the word "Savior" be properly applied to him? Does he save us only from one aspect of sin—its guilt—only to leave us at the mercy of its power? Can this be called "salvation"?

If Christ does not, or cannot, break the power of sin within me, he would be forever paying my debts. This so-called salvation leaves me more wretched than before. I am condemned to a life of misery under the bondage to sin, and I will always be grieving the Lord whom I love. I will always be lamenting like Paul in his days before Romans 8 became a reality in his life: "*Wretched man that I am!*" (Romans 7:24).

Many have been brought up in the doctrine of a purely judicial salvation. Many have been living the defeated Christian life, always asking for forgiveness because of being powerless to live victoriously. They go from one failure to another, failing in such basic daily matters as interpersonal

relationships, which break down at home, in the family, and among friends, leading to frustration and despair.

To put it bluntly, unless salvation frees us from the power of sin in our lives, we would have no use for this kind of “salvation,” any more than a drug addict has use for a forgiveness that doesn’t break his addiction.

But Paul has good news for us: “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:2). The whole of Romans 8 elaborates on this point. If the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus operates in us, we will overcome sin. Too many Christians have lost sight of the good news in that chapter, which gives us the key to spiritual victory.

Scripture does not teach the eradication of sin but a doctrine of victory. Victory implies the presence of an enemy, and that enemy is sin. Although sin remains in our flesh, we can triumph over it because God’s Spirit and God’s nature abide in us.

If salvation is purely judicial, we wouldn’t need to talk about life or growth or victory in daily life because these concepts are alien to the judicial concept of salvation, which reduces salvation to forgiveness.

But life has to do with the reality of power—God’s power—that imparts a fresh dynamism to us. That new life begins with being born anew (regeneration), which enters into a process of growth (renewal), and proceeds on to maturity (perfection, Christ-likeness).

God's Word promotes a salvation that is far more than forgiveness, wonderful though forgiveness may be. Moreover, *forgiveness is not yet regeneration*, but opens the door to a new life in Christ and to the whole wondrous process that follows it. If we equate salvation merely with forgiveness, we are excluding regeneration from salvation, and fall into serious error. God's salvation involves much more than being forgiven; it is the bringing into being of a whole new person in Christ. Salvation is much more than a legal act; it is a creative act which brings a "new creation" into being (2Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15). It is not primarily a matter of law but of *life*.

## **The dangers of spiritual infancy**

Even if we have been born again, don't we find ourselves failing from time to time? It may happen more often than we wish. Why do we sin even though we have the new nature in us?

We have already discussed the danger of remaining in spiritual infancy. Although everyone has to go through the stage of infancy, we wouldn't want to stay there longer than necessary. Let us consider three main dangers which lurk in spiritual infancy.

### **The first danger: Ignorance**

The first danger is *ignorance*. Children are ignorant of many things in life, and for that reason are said to be naive. They

think simplistically even when the situation is complicated. Ignorance leads to sins of ignorance or the unwitting committing of sins.

Paul does not address the Corinthians as “spiritual men” but as “men of flesh” and “babes in Christ” (1Cor.3:1). Three chapters later, the question “Do you not know?” is reiterated a total of six times in one chapter alone (1Cor.6:2,3,9,15,16,19). Their spiritual ignorance is a cause for deep concern to Paul. He points out six things that they ought to know but do not: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?” (v.2); or that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” (v.9); or that “your bodies are members of Christ?” (v.15); and so on. The Corinthians haven’t grasped these basic spiritual truths because they are “babes in Christ”. Carnal and immature, they don’t understand important truths concerning the spiritual life.

Ignorance in spiritual infancy is seen above all in the ignorance of God’s Word. John says, “I am writing this to you so that you may not sin” (1Jn.2:1). How could John’s letter stop people from sinning? By teaching vital spiritual truths to those who don’t know God’s word—truths that can change our lives.

### **Second danger: Old carnal habits**

The second danger in spiritual infancy is that our thinking has not been renewed. Children are carnal and self-centered by nature. Their thinking is centered on *me and mine*. Their words and actions revolve around themselves. They are

almost incapable of talking about anything but themselves and their own interests.

When you first become a Christian, your old self-centered way of life still has a strong influence on your new life. In your old life, you were the center of your own thoughts and deeds. Your thoughts revolved around yourself: your studies, your future, your career, your family, your this and that. These *habits of the mind* are hard to break, and will lead to sin in the new life. That is why the mind must be renewed (Rom.12:2; Eph.4:23).

When I first arrived in Hong Kong, I still had the habit of speaking Mandarin Chinese to everyone. Almost everyone in China understands Mandarin, and most of them speak it, even if often with a local accent. I therefore assumed that everyone in Hong Kong spoke Mandarin. But when I spoke in Mandarin, to my surprise many didn't understand what I was saying. I thought to myself, "Am I in a foreign place? These people look Chinese but they don't speak Chinese (Mandarin)!" It was hard for me to break the habit of speaking in Mandarin.

There was another habit. In China at that time, you addressed everyone as *tongzhi* (comrade). Predictably enough, when I got to Hong Kong, I was calling everyone *tongzhi*. When I got on the bus, I would say to the conductor, "Tongzhi, I would like to ..." and he would give me a strange look. I was wondering if I had said something wrong. The habit was so entrenched that it became second

nature to me, and I used the term even in Hong Kong where it is not used.

Likewise, we bring many old habits into the new life in Christ. We do things that offend people, even hurting them unintentionally. We need to be “renewed in the spirit of your (our) mind” (Eph.4:23). We need to discard the old person we used to be, and live as the new person God has created us to be (Eph.4:22-24; cf. Col.3:1-17).

### **Third danger: Not abiding in the Lord**

The third danger in spiritual infancy is that young Christians have not learned to abide in Christ (live in Christ). At times we abide, at times we do not. We are spiritually up and down, here and there, happy and sad, better and worse. We constantly run into problems because we have not learned the lesson of steadfast abiding, that is, of continuous fellowship with the Lord. We still don't know how to communicate with him.

Friendship takes time to develop. In our spiritual infancy, we still regard the Lord as an unfamiliar friend. We don't know him well, and cannot converse with him as with a close friend. We talk to him with a sense of formality.

### **“Little children”**

We are now in a better position to understand today's passage: “No one born of God practices sin, because His seed

abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9).

If this is taken to mean that it is impossible to sin, then we are in flat contradiction with some other statements such as 1John 2:1, “My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” It is precisely because little children can and do sin that John is writing to them to alert them to the danger of being ensnared in sin. 1John 3:9 must not be taken in isolation, but in the context of John’s letter.

The verse we just quoted has the interesting term “little children”. It comes from the Greek word *teknion* (plural, *teknia*), which is the diminutive form of *teknon*, and which occurs seven times in 1John (2:1,12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21).<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, John’s letter is addressed mainly to “little children,” that is, young Christians. (Jesus also calls his disciples “little children” in John 13:33, using the same Greek word.) Hence John is writing mainly to spiritual infants. When we examine the seven occurrences of “little children” in his letter, we see that John is mainly giving them

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<sup>21</sup>It is intriguing that many things occur seven times in John’s writings, whether seven times in his gospel, or seven times in his letters, or seven times in Revelation. Many have seen God’s amazing inspiration in this numerical pattern of seven. When John wrote this letter, he could hardly have sat down to count how many times he had used certain words.

*warnings, exhortations, and reminders*, out of a concern for their spiritual safety.

Though writing mainly to “little children,” John also addresses three other types of Christians. In 1John 2:12-14 he distinguishes four main types of Christians:

I am writing to you, **little children**, because your sins are forgiven you for his name’s sake. I am writing to you, **fathers**, because you know him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, **young men**, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, **children**, because you know the Father. I have written to you, **fathers**, because you know him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, **young men**, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

In this passage John addresses four groups of people: little children, children,<sup>22</sup> young men, and fathers. These do not refer to children, etc., in the literal, physical sense, but to different levels of spiritual maturity.

John is mainly concerned about the “little children,” whom he addresses more often than he does the other Christians.

The “fathers,” the spiritually mature, are obviously the church leaders. They have been walking with God at a deeper level. Church leaders are not necessarily older in

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<sup>22</sup> “Children” in 2:13 translates a different Greek word, *paidia*, so it cannot simply be assumed that it still refers to the “little children” (*teknia*) of v.12.



terms of physical age. Timothy, for example, was a church leader and therefore a “father” in this sense, yet he was relatively young in terms of physical age (1Tim.4:12).

The fathers are those who “know Him who is from the beginning,” and walk in an intimate relationship with Him. The fathers know God personally, not merely intellectually. They are mature, and walk with God moment by moment.

The “young men” are more mature than the “children,” but are probably not church leaders. John describes them as “strong” because they have “overcome the evil one”. Unlike the children, the young men have spiritual strength. The word of God “abides” in them, that is, it is living and active in them. As a result, they triumph over the attacks and temptations from the evil one.

### **Seven vital truths for the “little children”**

The “little children” are repeatedly reminded of basic truths and the need to apply them. An important part of learning is inculcation and reminder. Let us go through the occurrences of “little children” to see this general pattern.

(1) John addresses the little children for the first time in 1 John 2:1: “My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. But if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Committing sin will give Satan, “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev.12:10), an opportunity to accuse us. The children are *reminded* that in their position against Satan—

who is the relentless and merciless accuser “who accuses them before our God day and night” (Rev.12:10)—their one hope is Jesus our Advocate.

(2) Verse 12 says, “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake.” They are *reminded* of God’s grace and kindness to them for Jesus’ sake.

(3) In verse 28, John writes, “Little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.” They are *reminded* of the judgment at the Lord’s coming.

(4) 1John 3:7: “Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous”. Children are vulnerable to deception, so they are *reminded* to practice righteousness. This is hardly a new teaching to them. Notice, too, that the statement rejects the purely judicial view of salvation when it says that the righteous person is the one who “practices righteousness”. The next verse declares that “*the one who practices sin is of the devil.*” Anyone who insists on the *exclusively* judicial view of salvation (which denies the need to “practice righteousness”) and continues to “practice evil” should take careful note of these words.

(5) 1John 3:18: “Little children, let us not love with words or with tongue, but in deed and in truth”. Love is a central element of practicing righteousness. Notice the emphasis on action rather than talk.

(6) 1John 4:4: “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.” They are *reminded* that they have overcome the spirits of the false prophets (v.1) and the spirit of the antichrist, which is now active in the world (v.3). This was possible because of the Spirit of God who now dwells in them (“He who is in you”).

(7) The final verse of John’s letter is again addressed to the “little children”. They are lovingly but sternly *reminded* about the deadly danger of idols. Idols sever our relationship with God. Children are very vulnerable to temptation in the form of attractive idols, whether material possessions, or false teachings that appeal to the flesh, or anything else that may distract them from the Lord. It is a matter of spiritual life and death that little children are warned to “*guard yourselves from idols*” (1John 5:21).

## **Abide in the Lord**

We are now in a better position to return to our question: In the light of 1 John 3:9, *is the Christian capable or incapable of sinning?* We have partially answered the question. As we have seen, little children in Christ can sin (2:1) and can be attracted to all kinds of idols (5:21). The warning about idols implies that little children are vulnerable to the great danger of idolatry. If Christians are incapable of sinning, this warning would be irrelevant. Neither would there be any

point in saying, “I am writing this to you so that you may not sin” (1Jn.2:1).

From the wider context of John’s letter, it is clear that 1John 3:9 does not support the eradicationist view. John does not teach that whoever is born of God is by that very fact incapable of sinning.

How then do we understand the statement, “He cannot sin”? The key lies in the word “abide” (cf., 1John 3:6, “no one who abides in him sins”). This word is of paramount importance in John’s writing. The word “abide” (Greek *menō*, μένω) occurs 40 times in John’s gospel, and 24 times in 1John, a short letter of five chapters. By comparison, “abide” occurs only 17 times in all of Paul’s letters combined.

Let us summarize the main points on abiding:

(1) To abide means *to live with, to be at home with, and to be in constant fellowship with* (1Jn.1:3). To say that God abides in us (1Jn.4:12) is to say that He lives in us in a real and dynamic sense, not in some legal sense that is devoid of meaning. Abiding is a deep and reciprocal fellowship: We abide in him, and he in us (Jn.15:5).

(2) Abiding is *effected through the Holy Spirit*. 1John 3:24 says, “By this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.” God lives in us and fellowships with us by His Holy Spirit (cf. “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” in 2Cor.13:14).

(3) Our abiding in Christ is not automatic but *conditional*. Note the conditional “if” in 1John 2:24-25: “If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise which He made to us: eternal life.”

(4) *Abiding has to do with eternal life*. We have eternal life if we abide in the Father and in the Son, and if God’s word is living in us dynamically and not merely intellectually.

(5) Abiding cannot be separated from *obeying God’s word*. 1John 3:24 says, “The one who keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in him.” The greatest commandment is love, hence it is not surprising that love and abiding are linked: “If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).

## **If we abide in him, we cannot sin**

Let us conclude. What is John teaching us? The vital principle is this: *If we abide in the Lord and he abides in us, we cannot sin*. This is seen in 1John 3:6: “No one who abides in him sins”. It’s that simple. If we abide in him, we will not sin. If we live in him, we will be unable at the same time to continue living in sin. *It is not possible to live simultaneously in God and in sin*. Sadly, Christians don’t always consistently abide in God, especially during spiritual infancy, so they slide into sin from time to time.

John clearly does not teach the total eradication of our sinful nature. Yet he also affirms that it is possible not to sin,

if we abide in God, and He in us. If God abides in us, if His Holy Spirit abides in us, if His nature abides in us, *we cannot sin*. The word “abide” occurs even in the key statement, verse 9: “God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” (Here “seed,” *sperma*, refers to the beginning of a new life that God implanted in us at our regeneration).

Freedom from sin comes from abiding in God. We cannot sin if we abide in Him and live in fellowship with Him. But if we don’t abide in Him, *we will sin*. This is a matter of experience, not of theory. Apply this principle and you will see that it is true.

The fact that *abide* occurs 24 times in this one letter should alert us to the fact that this matter is of life-and-death importance. The failure to abide in Christ, periodically wandering away from him, could result in the going “out from us” (that is, from the fellowship of God’s people) all together (1Jn.2:19), thus ending up as being one of the antichrists. Abiding is therefore not just a desirable option but a vital necessity.

## Chapter 9



# REASONS FOR SIN IN THE RENEWAL PROCESS

## **Sin leads to doubt over whether we have been born anew**

**S**ome people, even after reading these chapters, are still unsure if they are regenerate. This uncertainty is inevitable if they continue to live in sin. Every time you sin, the question of whether you are regenerate will come back to trouble you. The problem will become more and more acute until you deal with sin decisively, as opposed to choosing the fatal path of smothering your conscience.

Every time you do something wrong, you might say to yourself, “Am I a true Christian? If I am regenerate, why am I behaving like this?” Where is the borderline—the line of demarcation—that crosses into regeneration? How can we

tell whether we have crossed it? Or does my problem have to do with renewal rather than regeneration?

## **The continuing battle with sin**

Not even when we are born anew is sin eradicated from our lives. Sin is always a possibility because it dwells in our flesh. The flesh, according to Paul, is where sin has its root or base of operation. So long as we have a body of flesh, sin will dwell there, entrenched in our flesh.

It doesn't mean that we have no choice but to sin. With God's help we can overcome the sin that is lodged in our flesh. In fact all our lives we will be waging a war with this ever-present reality of sin. By God's grace we can triumph over sin and become stronger with every victory over it.

At those times when you seem to be losing the battle, the question, "Am I truly regenerate?" may come back to perplex you. You may have lost your temper or treated your roommate inappropriately. After coming to your senses, you ask yourself, "How could I, as a Christian, have behaved like that?" Then you begin to doubt whether you are a true Christian. This problem is particularly acute for those who lose the battle frequently.

## **Slavery versus freedom**

What is the line of demarcation between the unregenerate man and the regenerate man? In Romans 6 to 8, Paul gives a clear answer. To remove any guesswork, let us establish



*statistically* what the important words in these three chapters are. The frequency of words will help us establish what Paul is saying, so that our conclusions are based on facts and not on guesswork.

In these three chapters, particularly in Romans 6:18-8:21, Paul uses the word “free” and related words frequently—seven times to be exact. These Greek words are all related: *eleutheroō* (ἐλευθερώω, to set free), *eleutheros* (ἐλεύθερος, free) and *eleutheria* (ἐλευθερία, freedom).<sup>23</sup>

In these three chapters, Paul uses another word even more often: “slave” (plus related words such as “slavery” and “enslave”). These occur a total of 13 times.<sup>24</sup> This is significant because these words occur only four times in the rest of Romans.

Hence the opposite concepts of *slavery* and *freedom* are two key ideas in Romans 6-8. Moreover, when Paul employs these concepts, it is in connection to sin. Therefore Romans 6-8 has two specific themes: *slavery to sin* and *freedom from sin*. This gives us a clear line of demarcation: The unregenerate man is enslaved to sin whereas the regenerate man has been freed from sin.

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<sup>23</sup> The first of these words occurs in Romans 6:18,22; 8:2,21; the second in 6:20 and 7:3; the third in 8:21. *Eleutheroō* can be active (I set free) or passive (I am being set free).

<sup>24</sup> In these three chapters, Paul uses *doulos* (slave) six times, *douleuō* (to be enslaved) three times, *douloō* (to enslave) twice, and *douleia* (slavery) twice. See Romans 6:6,16-20,22; 7:6,25; 8:15,21.

The unregenerate man lives under the dominion of sin,<sup>25</sup> whereas the regenerate man has been set free from it because he has died with Christ and has been raised with him. That is the central thesis of Romans 6 to 8; it is the sharp line of demarcation between the two.

The regenerate man has experienced God's power that broke the chains and shackles of sin in his life. In his former days, he was sinning by sheer compulsion because he was too weak to resist sin. But now he is a new person in Christ, and is no longer under the compulsion to sin. He can still sin out of carelessness, but is no longer under its power. He can still lose his temper as before because the reaction may have been habitual and the habit is not yet broken; but the flare-up can be controlled because the Holy Spirit has come into his life, giving him the strength to overcome it.

### **Are you under compulsion to sin?**

“The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2). If you are regenerate, the law (principle) of sin and death can no longer compel you. Apply this litmus test to your life. Are you still failing to break free from a particular sin despite repeated attempts? Then you are still unregenerate and still enslaved

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<sup>25</sup> “Dominion” is another key word in the section of Romans we are studying. The verb *kurieuō* (to have power over, to rule over) occurs three times in Romans 6–7 but only four times in the rest of the New Testament.

to it. You are too weak to resist it; and even when you do resist, the effort tends to be futile because sin still compels you despite your intentions.

The compulsion to sin doesn't necessarily stem from a desire to sin. The will of the unregenerate man is not in bondage to the extent of being totally incapable of *willing* the good (Romans 7:18,19). It is in bondage only in the sense of being unable to *do* the good. We must get this distinction clear in our minds. The unregenerate man is capable of desiring the good (and he occasionally does good, e.g., donating money to an orphanage or a famine relief) but he is powerless to live the righteous life *consistently*. Paul does not depict the unregenerate man as being totally incapable of doing any good at all, but as being unable to live a consistently righteous life. By contrast, the regenerate man is able to live the righteous life consistently despite the occasional sin committed unintentionally.

The line of demarcation can be restated as follows: The unregenerate man may do the occasional good, but cannot live in righteousness consistently. The regenerate man, on the other hand, might commit the occasional sin, but he lives in righteousness consistently.

Which is your situation? If by God's grace you can say "no" to sin, then you are regenerate. If and when you do sin, your conscience will be disturbed right away, and will impel you to repent straightaway.

But if sinning doesn't bother your conscience, you have every reason to doubt your regeneration, for if the Holy

Spirit is living in you, your conscience would be sensitive to sin. The sins that didn't bother you before now have a way of disturbing you profoundly. That is a sure sign that the Spirit is working in you. You can tell whether you are a child of God by whether you are grieved and contrite after committing a sin.

A sensitive conscience is the evidence that the Spirit is working in your heart. The grief that comes from having sinned against God is a sign that you are a child of God. But the one who sins and is not grieved by it, is not a true Christian. He shrugs it off: "Nobody's perfect. Many people do the same." This shows that his conscience is hardened to God's voice.

With this line of demarcation, it is easy to discern for yourself whether you have been born anew. It is harder for other people to tell whether you are regenerate because they have no direct access to your conscience. But in your own heart, you can tell whether you have been freed from sin or not.

## **Being religious versus being spiritual**

If you are truly regenerate, why do you still fail from time to time? Why do you still do the things that are displeasing to God?

In Romans chapter 7, Paul describes his state of affairs in the days when he lived under the Law. As a practicing Pharisee, he was trying to fulfill the righteous requirements

of the Law in his own strength. He soon realized that although he could and did comply with the letter of the Law in terms of outward literal observance, he could not fulfill its spirit within his own heart.

The commands regarding the Sabbath, not stealing, not committing adultery, he successfully obeyed; but what about covetousness in the heart?<sup>26</sup> What about loving God with the whole heart and loving the neighbor as oneself, which together constitute the sum total of all the commandments? These were beyond the hope of attainment. The good that Paul wanted to do, he could not do. In that sense, the religious man is no better off than the unregenerate man. Being religious is not the same as being spiritual; the two must not be confused.

Whereas Romans 7 describes the predicament of a religious man living under the Law, Romans 8 describes the freedom of a spiritual man living by the Spirit. This brings out the vital distinction between being religious and being spiritual. Many people in the world are religious in the sense of following a religion. Romans 7 warns us of the futility of being a religious person, even a religious Christian. *We are not saved by religion but by Christ.* Paul knows from his own experience that religion does not free a man from slavery to sin.

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<sup>26</sup> As regards the tenth commandment (“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, etc.” Ex.20:17), so long as no *act* of coveting has been committed, the commandment as such has not been broken. Law can only regulate external acts.

Romans 7 is different from the adjacent chapters because here Paul is speaking in the first person. He is speaking from his intensely personal experience of being a religious Pharisee who lived under the Law yet languished under slavery to sin. Religious people are generally unregenerate people; so they will not change until the Holy Spirit comes into their lives, and they become new people in Christ.

### **The three types of people in Romans 6 to 8**

The three chapters—Romans 6,7,8—describe three types of people:

- Romans 6 is applicable to all unregenerate people,
- Romans 7 describes the predicament of the unregenerate religious or moral person, the religious Jew being an example of this,
- Romans 8 portrays life as a regenerate or spiritual person.

These three chapters are among the most important in the Bible. If your life story has gone from Romans 6 to Romans 7 to Romans 8 (or directly from 6 to 8, if you have never been a religious person), then you can be sure that you are a new person in Christ. As a regenerate person, you now live by the Holy Spirit under the lordship of Yahweh God. At this point you can start talking about renewal. If regeneration had not yet taken place, there would be no renewal to talk about.

## Three vital points about renewal

### **First: Renewal implies a progressive removal of the old**

Paul says, “Though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2Cor.4:16). The words “renewed day by day” indicate that renewal is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. Today you are being renewed, tomorrow you will be renewed, and so it continues until you meet the Lord. At this very moment, while reading this exposition of God’s word, you are being renewed.

The word “renewal” implies that the old still exists in us. By God’s grace, the old is being removed progressively in the renewal process. If the old had vanished completely, there would be nothing left to renew. In reality the old is still present in the Christian life but it is being steadily removed as we move closer to the image of Christ.

Every day in the renewal process, we move one step closer to our final destination. When we evaluate our present position compared with where we were before, we will see that we are gradually getting closer to the fullness of Christ’s stature.

### **Second: Renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit**

Renewal is not achieved by human effort; we cannot renew ourselves by our own righteous deeds. It is the Holy Spirit who renews us. The Spirit of God is the chief engineer of the

renewal process. Every day the Spirit is transforming us through our life situations.

You may find yourself in an unhappy situation, say, in your marriage or in your relationship with your college roommate. Are you aware that these problems, whether they pertain to your roommate or your marriage or your health or your work or your studies, are being used by the Holy Spirit to renew you? Once you realize that, you would not grumble about it. It often takes a lot of hammering, grinding, sanding, and polishing to produce a beautiful piece of work.

From time to time I work on the rust spots of my car. I would use a sharp tool to scrape off the rust until the bare metal is exposed. I work hard at it, hammering away until the rust is removed. I then patch the hole with fiberglass, and sand it down with coarse sandpaper by hand or with a machine. Next, I use fine sandpaper to get a smooth surface, over which I apply a coat of paint, then a second coat, then a third. The fumes that fill the place can do interesting things to your respiratory system if you are allergic to the chemicals. But when you are done, ah, the work is beautiful. Few will be able to tell that something was previously wrong with the car. The car has been renewed: the old has gone and the new has come.

You need sharp tools to do the hammering and chiseling. That's exactly what the Holy Spirit does to us in renewing us. Our rough spots are showing, so God has to work on us. Your husband or your wife may turn out to be the rough



sandpaper that God applies to you, removing your rough edges and making you beautiful. In that process, you might not appreciate your husband or wife or roommate who is “rubbing you the wrong way”.

Though the hammering and the polishing are not pleasant experiences, how else will we be made beautiful? Paul exhorts us to give thanks in all situations (1Th.5:18) because all things work out for good in God’s hand. If we take it in the right attitude, we are going to be beautiful; but if we take it in the wrong spirit, we will only get uglier. Thanks be to God, He is working in us through the Spirit, renewing us every day in various life situations, making us yet more beautiful and bringing us closer to the image of Christ.

### **Third: Renewal of our minds**

Renewal changes the way we think and therefore the way we act. Our actions stem from our thoughts. When we lose our temper, it originates from the heart. “The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Mt.12:34). If you think something unkind, you will say something unkind. To change our speech or conduct, the Holy Spirit has to work on our minds. Ephesians 4:22-23 says,

... you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you **be renewed in the spirit of your mind.**

The Holy Spirit has to change the spirit or attitude of our minds. “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

Attitudes are hard to change, but we must remember that the old and the new are incompatible. We cannot patch a new piece of cloth onto an old garment because when the patch shrinks, it will tear off from the garment (Mt.9:16-17). Nor do you pour new wine into an old wineskin because the skin will burst, spilling the wine. The old and the new are utterly incompatible. If your mind has not been renewed, a fierce battle will rage inside you. The conflict between the old and the new will make life unbearable, zapping away any peace or happiness that you may have.

Any effort on our part to harmonize the two will be in vain. We cannot say to ourselves, “I am willing to be made new in order to be saved, but I also want to keep the old because I still have pet sins such as selfishness. I have lived with these all my life, and I cannot bid them farewell just yet.” The refusal to let go of the old while also trying to take hold of the new will inevitably lead to problems in the form of an inner conflict.

The intense inner battle can even lead to mental breakdown. If that should ever happen to a Christian, people will wonder why he became a Christian in the first place. The conflict between the old and the new must be settled once and for all.

If anyone thinks it is too costly to put away the old in order to enter the new, it would be best for him to forget

about being a Christian. Go out and enjoy sin while there is opportunity. Sin today and die tomorrow. Judgment and hell await such a person, but for now, he can enjoy his sins in the little time that remains. But he cannot play around with both the old life and the new. That would be like mixing two volatile chemicals and getting an explosion.

It is hard to understand why some people cling to the old even after they have been warned about it time and again. They mix in equal portions of the old and the new, harming themselves and others in a conflict between the two irreconcilable elements. Some try to minimize the damage by mixing a larger amount of the new with a smaller amount of the old. But a small explosion is still an explosion, and can cause a lot of damage.

To live the Christian life as it is meant to be lived, in the joy and peace available to us in Christ, we must get rid of the old. Someone might say, “Aren’t you contradicting yourself because just now you said that the old still remains in us, to some extent at least?” Yes, the old is still around, but what matters is our attitude towards it. The old may still be around, but the question is whether we are condoning and pampering it. Or do we let it die by refusing to submit to it, by not compromising with it? The old may be present, but it cannot do much to us if we constantly say “no” to it.

## **The battle against sin will make us stronger**

We will grow stronger and stronger through battling the old. I used to wonder why God does not simply remove the old instantly, but now I see His wisdom. It is through constant battle with the old that we grow ever stronger. If there were no battles to fight or challenges to face, we would become weak.

When I was young, I grew strong because of fighting. We boys had a way of getting into fights. But strangely, we would remain good friends after a fight, forgetting the disagreement that started the fight in the first place.

One can acquire a strong physique through wrestling, boxing, or the martial arts. Another way is through competitive sports. Now I see God's wisdom in allowing us to go through nonstop fighting with the old things in us, to make us stronger in the new life.

Though the old is still with us and is still strong, especially in young Christians, we gain constant victory by depending ever more on the Spirit. Winning battles will get easier with time as we grow stronger. But we need to keep alert and rely on the Holy Spirit constantly.

## **The Greek words for "new"**

When we are spiritually young and inexperienced at the start of the Christian life, we are still relatively weak and fall into sin more easily. The contrast between "old man" and "new man" is very relevant in this regard. Colossians 3:9-10 says:

Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the *old* man with his deeds, and have put on the *new* man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. (NKJV)

We are in the process of being renewed into the image of our Creator and Redeemer. The “old man” is discarded like old clothes and the “new man” is “put on” like new garments.

There are two Greek words for “new”: *neos* (νέος) and *kainos* (καινός). *Neos* means new in terms of age or time, whereas *kainos* means new in terms of quality. The concise United Bible Societies *Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* defines *neos* as “new, fresh, young,” and *kainos* as “new, of new quality,” though there is an overlap in meaning between the two words.

A thing can be new in terms of its age, or it can be new in terms of its having a different quality. This important distinction does not come out in the English except by paraphrasing.

*Kainos* is used by Jesus at the Last Supper when he speaks of “the new covenant in my blood” (Lk.22:20; 1Cor.11:25; cf. 2Cor.3:6; Heb.8:8,13; 9:15). It is *qualitatively* new, that is, it is *different* from the old in that it is “better” (Heb.7:22; 8:6). But the new covenant is new also in the other sense of “new”: In Hebrews 12:24, *neos* is used of the “new covenant” to indicate that it is new in time; it is more *recent* than the Old Covenant established 1500 years earlier.

The “new man” is also new in both senses. On the one hand, “new man” in Ephesians 2:15 is *kainos anthrōpos*, referring to a new man who lives a new quality of life, one that is totally *different* from the old life. On the other hand, it is also true, as is seen in “the *new (neos) man*” of Colossians 3:10, that the new man is new in the sense of being more recent in time as compared to the old: we were first born physically and only later born anew spiritually. But even this serves to emphasize the *qualitative difference* too: The old is of the flesh, the new is of the Spirit.

Notice how the qualitative newness of *kainos* finds expression in the following two verses: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2Cor.5:17) “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.” (Gal.6:15)

## **Four reasons for sins in the renewal process**

Let us consider four things that give rise to sin in the renewal process.

### **First reason: The attractions of the world**

A “new man” who is spiritually young tends to be fascinated by superficial things. This is a common reason for sin in the renewal process. He might not intend to sin but he is attracted to the superficial because of immaturity.

Children love toys, whether they are two years old, ten years old, or fifty years old. Walk into any toy store and take a look. Some stores have toys that are designed for grown-ups, and they dignify these toys by calling them “model airplanes” which you build yourself. And these are exciting! There are radio-controlled planes that can fly. Have you ever seen a ten-year-old playing with one of these? It’s more likely to be a thirty-year-old or a fifty-year-old. If you strike up a conversation with one of them, he will tell you, “This is my son’s toy.” Of course the son hardly gets a chance to play with it because the father doesn’t want him to smash it up. So the father ends up enjoying the expensive radio-controlled airplane.

The spiritually immature are attracted to the toys of the world. If you think you are above that, just walk into a shopping plaza and watch your reaction. The world has so many fascinating gadgets on display. The other day I saw an advertisement for a camera that talks to you. When you are about to shoot, it says, “Too dark” or “Out of focus”. At the end of the roll, it says, “No more film”. The newest cameras don’t even need to talk; they automatically adjust everything for you.

There is also the TV watch. On the bus you can switch on your TV watch and enjoy the baseball game. To get a full sound, plug in an earphone. It’s a fascinating toy. Of course it will set you back \$500, which is unaffordable to most twenty-year-olds, but within the reach of many fifty-year-old kids. The Christian too is fascinated by the TV watch.

He looks into his wallet and says to himself, “Five hundred dollars! But I deserve a treat once in a while, don’t I?” After paying the \$500, your conscience begins to bother you. You realize that you have wasted money on a toy, and then you remember that brother so-and-so cannot pay his school fees.

The spiritually young Christian sins because he is still fascinated by the world. The world has it all, from smart gadgets to electronic games. The world knows how to keep you occupied 24 hours a day.

In the process of renewal, we face temptations posed by a mind-boggling array of new toys being advertised everywhere to capture our imagination. When a new-model computer arrives on the market, it is already on its way to obsolescence.

High-tech devices such as computers are undeniably useful, and in today’s world, almost indispensable. This gives the fascination with these devices a certain legitimacy, even in the minds of Christians. We do well to heed Paul’s cautionary words that we should be as those “who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away” (1Cor.7:31).

The fascination with the toys of the world has caused the downfall of many Christians who have no more time for spiritual things. Who wants to read the Bible when you can watch kung fu movies? You have Chinese kung fu, Japanese karate, and Korean Tae Kwon Do. It is fun to watch people flying up the walls and running on rooftops. The Bible seems less exciting.



The world ensnares us with its array of attention-getting devices. This is one of the many dangers in the renewal process. “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1Jn.2:15).

## **Second reason: Inability to distinguish good and evil**

Secondly, we sin in the renewal process when we are *unable to distinguish between good and evil*. The danger is especially real for those who are young in the faith, as was the case with the Corinthians, who had difficulty discerning good and evil. Hebrews 5:13-14 says,

For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

The young Christian lives on “milk” (the elementary teachings in God’s word), and is unskilled in “the word of righteousness”. The Bible contains milk as well as solid food. The young Christian feeds on milk whereas the mature Christian feeds, according to his capacity, on solid food. Those who live on milk are those who have not yet grown to the point where they can digest the word of righteousness; they are still spiritually immature and cannot discern good and evil.

What we need to learn from this important verse is that if we do not grow out of infancy into maturity, that is, if we do not grow out of the milk-drinking stage to the solid food stage, we may not survive in the spiritual life. Why? Because we wouldn't be able to distinguish between good and evil, between what is good for us and what is deadly to us. An infant living on milk would scarcely know the difference between the family's farm animals and a wolf that comes in search of a prey—including the infant itself.

### **Discerning good and evil is a matter of life and death**

Discerning good and evil is a matter of life and death. Growing from spiritual infancy to maturity is not something we can be indifferent to, for it is a matter of survival. Amazingly, some Christian leaders today are so ignorant of this truth that they regard in-depth Bible training as unnecessary. Just stick to simple Bible reading, they would say.

But the “solid food” which Hebrews speaks of is not easy to digest, especially for babies who are unable to discern between good and evil, or to comprehend deeper Biblical truths. They urgently need to grow into maturity in Christ if they are not to end up as spiritual casualties because of a lack of discernment.

### **Many churches are unable to provide spiritual nourishment**

Some churches are unable to provide anything more than milk, because not even their leaders can handle the “solid

food” of “the word of righteousness”. The consequences for such churches are tragic: the people cannot grow beyond infancy and become weak because the vital spiritual nourishment needed for further growth is unavailable; often they are scattered and harmed by “savage wolves” (Ac.20:29; Mt.7:15). They have neither the capacity to discern the wolves nor the strength to resist them.

Many church leaders are poorly trained in the exposition and exegesis of God’s Word. The matter is made worse when they try to justify their incapacity to feed those under their care with the explanation that “simple” teaching is actually all that is needed. So their churches are left without the hope of moving beyond the infancy stage, without the hope of reaching the stage in which they develop spiritual discernment, with “their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb.5:14).

Paul had to deal with the serious problem of poor discernment among the Corinthians. He said to them:

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. (2Corinthians 11:4, NIV)

The Corinthians had not grown out of the infancy stage; they were still “babes”. That is why Paul told them earlier, “I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able”

(1Cor.3:2). So when eloquent people came along and preached another Jesus or another gospel, they could not tell the difference. They could not tell one gospel from another, one Jesus from another, one apostle from another. Neither could they discern good from evil, true from false. This left them vulnerable to spiritual deception and disaster.

### **The gullibility and vulnerability of infant Christians**

Paul exposes their vulnerability by pointing out their gullibility: If someone proclaims himself a super apostle, putting on airs and speaking in a self-elevating manner, they listen to him, swayed by his charm and charisma (cf. 2Cor.11:4,5,13). Then Paul remonstrates, “For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge” (vv.5-6).

Chapters 11 and 12 tell us what was happening. Slick and charismatic preachers were preaching a different gospel, and their eloquence was sweeping the Corinthians off their feet. Paul, after conceding that he was less eloquent than these super-eloquent preachers, went on to bemoan the fact that, “You bear with anyone if he enslaves you, if he devours you, if he takes advantage of you (e.g., gets money out of you), if he exalts himself, if he hits you in the face” (v.20).

Then he added sarcastically, “To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison” (v.21). What did he mean by this? He was saying to them in effect, “In your presence we acted courteously and gently, without bossing

you around or barking out commands. And you despise us for that. Then the super-apostles came along in a self-exalting grandiose manner, barking out orders and making demands, and you readily submitted to their authority.”

It is amazing that people are adored for putting on airs. Hitler screamed and shouted, yet multitudes applauded him and obeyed his every whim. They ecstatically saluted him with shouts of “Heil! Heil!”

Paul was telling the Corinthians, “If someone enslaves you, you bear it well enough. But when we come along and act humbly, you despise us.” The Corinthians could not tell between good and evil, true and false. People without spiritual discernment are easily swept away by worldly behavior and false teaching.

These super-apostles got money out of the Corinthians (2Cor. 11:7ff). That is why Paul wrote, “Did I commit a sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge?” Paul refused to take money from them, but when the “super-apostles” came along with their collection bags, the Corinthians were all too happy to unload their money. Paul was too “foolish” to do that, so the Corinthians despised him.

Worldly mentality is strange and twisted: Humility is seen as self-deprecating and invites disrespect, while those who make demands are seen as having authority. The greater the demands, the greater the authority. Many preachers use the phrase, “I want you to (raise your hand, come forward,

etc)”. Even if these exact words are not used, the preacher speaks in a commanding tone.

How crucial it is to have discernment, otherwise we will reject the apostle Paul and welcome some self-important “super-apostle” to our eternal detriment!

The carnal Christian thinks in a worldly way and holds to worldly values. He is impressed by the worldly ways of doing things, especially when done in grand style. He is taken advantage of by clever people in the church, especially impressive “apostles” or “super-apostles”. Be on the alert! There are people in the church today who do not hesitate to call themselves “apostles”.

The consequences of the lack of spiritual discernment are disastrous, as in the case of the Galatians to whom Paul said, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel” (1:6).

### **Third reason: Old habits of mind**

Thirdly, Christians sin because they have ingrained old habits of the mind. Habits are hard to change. When you first become a Christian, you still think in non-Christian ways. The old habits of the mind are removed through the gradual process of renewal.

Colossians 3:9 says, “You have put off the old man” (past event) whereas Ephesians 4:22 says, “Put off the old man” (present event). There seems to be a contradiction. If you

have already put off the old man, why must you continue to put off the old man? The reason is that though the old man was put off at baptism when we died with Christ and were buried with him, yet the old ways of the old man continue to live in the habits of our minds. The old man is still active through our old ways of thinking. It is this that needs to be “put off”; that is also why the next verse goes on to say, “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Eph.4:23).

In the same verse Paul says, “Do not lie to one another.” Surely we don’t expect the new man (in this case the Colossian believers) to lie, do we? Why then are they told not to lie? The problem is that in their non-Christian days, when they were still the “old man,” they were in the habit of lying. Whether it was a big lie or a “small white lie,” they habitually conformed to the ways of the world in their thinking and behavior. Lying is a way of life in the world, especially in the business world. Just the other day, someone told me that if you stop lying, you’ll soon be out of business. In the highly competitive world of business, we are told that we cannot survive without lying. People make money by lying; so if you don’t lie you are at a great disadvantage compared to others.

When people become Christians, the habit of lying is still so deeply ingrained that they lie inadvertently and without thinking. When Paul says, “Do not lie to one another,” he is telling them to put off the old habit of lying. Old habits are tenacious, but they will eventually destroy us if we do not remove them.

2 Peter 2:22 cites a proverb, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.” Like the pig that enjoys wallowing in the mud, some Christians go back into the “mud” by force of habit. It is not Peter’s intention to insult the Christian by that comparison. But he gives urgent warning that unless we change our habitual ways of thinking, we will be drawn back to the mud and filth of the old way of life even though we have been cleansed through “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5). Peter warns his readers of the serious danger of falling away in the renewal process and ending up in a situation in which their “last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away ...” (v.20,21).

The story is told of a pig who visited a stately mansion adorned with crystal chandeliers and expensive oil paintings. The pig walked into the mansion and trampled over the beautiful carpets—Afghan, Persian, and Chinese carpets. The pig was not, however, interested in the carpets or the paintings, but headed straight for the kitchen. Just as strange, it ignored the refrigerator filled with delicious food and headed straight for the back door. When it saw the garbage bin, it squealed with delight. After a garbage feast, the pig went home. The owner asked the pig, “What did you see in the stately mansion? Beautiful paintings and chandeliers?” The pig replied, “What paintings? What chandeliers? The only good thing was the garbage.”



When people go to church, what do they look for? The beauty of Christ? The righteousness of Christ? Hopefully, yes. But there are, sadly, some Christians who are interested chiefly in the garbage; these are the garbage-mongers in the church, the gossips and the slanderers whose habits of mind have not changed.

### **One bad habit can destroy you**

It takes just one bad habit to destroy your Christian life if you do not remove it. An Arab philosopher illustrated this with a real-life parable taken from his own life. He had offered his house for sale at a very low price but on one condition: “I shall retain possession of one nail that is located upstairs in this house. The nail will always be mine, and I retain the right and the freedom to visit it whenever I wish. I can come up anytime to inspect it or even to polish it. Only on this condition will I sell the house at this price.”

The price was so attractive that someone soon bought the house from him. As agreed, the original owner retained possession of the nail, and could go in and out whenever he wanted. Though he no longer owned the house, in reality he still possessed it because he had unrestricted access to it. It illustrates one vital point: If you keep one sinful habit in your life, sin will always retain possession of your life.

## Fourth reason: Ignorance

Fourthly, Christians sin because they are ignorant of many spiritual truths. Young Christians in particular are generally uninformed about what the Bible teaches, and are ignorant of God's will when confronted by life situations. That is why Paul says, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant ..." (1Thess. 4:13).

The Corinthians were evidently the least mature of the Christians that Paul had to deal with. It was to them that Paul repeatedly posed the rhetorical question, "*Do you not know?*" This question appears ten times in First Corinthians alone, but only twice in all the rest of his writings (Rom. 6:16; 11:2). They were so ignorant of spiritual things that they were falling into all kinds of sin such as dissension, and were even partaking of the Lord's Supper in the wrong spirit, thereby becoming guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord (1Cor.11:27).

Hence it is crucial to take to heart the apostle's counsel, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you" (Col.3:16). We need to let Christ's word live in our hearts in its dynamic richness. We need to know his word with depth and clarity. How can this be attained unless, like the Psalmist, we are prepared to meditate for long hours on God's word (Psalm 119:148)? Why does the Psalmist do this? "I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You" (119:11).

## Repent of your sins or they will destroy you

We have seen four reasons why Christians, especially young ones, might commit sin in the renewal process. You can be truly regenerate yet fall into sin. It is of the greatest importance to speedily repent of sin. The one who doesn't repent of a sin will feel the need to conceal it. But hidden sin has the tendency to grow larger and larger like a hidden cancer that will eventually kill and destroy.

To drive home the seriousness of the matter, I close with this true story. Some forty years ago in the United States, a respected pastor of a church—a married man—began to develop a liking for a young woman who was in charge of the church choir. He gradually built up a relationship with her. At first it seemed innocent, but the relationship grew deeper and deeper until he was having an affair with her. They became so deeply involved that one day the gravity of the situation began to dawn on him. The affair was in increasing danger of being exposed. If that should happen, how could he, a pastor, face the world? How would he look his wife and children in the face when they find out that the affair had been going on for several years?

But something worse happened: *she became pregnant*. How could he hide the matter? What would be the outcome of this messy affair? His career, his family life, and his reputation were on the line. How many non-Christians would be stumbled when they find out that a pastor had fallen into such heinous sin? The consequences were incalculable.

It started with a tiny thing, like the nail in the house. As he tried to hide it, it only got bigger and bigger. Instead of confessing the sin and dealing with it immediately, he allowed it to get out of hand.

And do you know what that pastor did? *He murdered the woman!* Mind-boggling, isn't it? A preacher who was committing adultery went on to commit murder, in the hope that killing her would terminate all the fearsome consequences of his sin. But the word of God says, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. 32:23). God won't allow sin to remain hidden and unaddressed. Sure enough, this whole hideous story was widely published in the newspapers.

Repent of sin speedily. Any attempt to conceal it will only make it worse. It will become harder to handle and to repent of, and it will eventually bring about destruction.

Let us realize with fear and trembling that pastors and preachers who sin and do not repent will not escape God's righteous judgment. They should not imagine that they can sin with impunity, or that they will always be safe from the fearful fires of hell. On the contrary, precisely because they are preachers and pastors, they will be judged the more severely. The Lord Jesus—who will be Judge on the Day of Judgment (2Tim.4:1)—warns us: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be required." (Luke 12:48)

## Chapter 10



# ABIDING IN CHRIST

**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 anyone does not **abide in me**, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If you **abide in me**, and my words **abide** in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. (John 15:4-7)

### **Abiding: The key to the new life in Christ**

**W**e now consider more fully the practical application of abiding in God and in Christ, which we discussed in chapter 8 of the present book. In the four verses from John chapter 15 that we have just cited, the word “abide” occurs seven times

(see the boldface), indicating its importance for us. What does it mean to “abide” in the Lord? We need to get an answer to this question because abiding is the key to the new life in Christ.

### **“I am the vine”**

The parable of the vine and the branches is familiar to us, yet few understand its deeper meaning. Let us consider Jesus’ words:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes it so that it will be even more fruitful.” (John 15:1,2; NIV).

These words state the reason for the branch’s existence: *The branch exists for the express purpose of bearing fruit.* Jesus is saying this in the context of his teaching on the Holy Spirit (John chapters 14-16); hence he has in mind what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal.5:22-23). The fruit of the Spirit in us will result in people being drawn to God and being built up in Him, through us. It results in fruitfulness for the growth of God’s Kingdom.

If any branch does not bear fruit, it is taken away, plain and simple. There is nothing vague about this statement. If you don’t bear fruit, you will be removed or “cut off” (v.2). No one remains in the church—the body of Christ—simply for the purpose of existing there. He or she is there to bear

fruit. Referring to those branches which do bear some fruit, Jesus says in verses 2 and 3,

Every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

Here the Greek has a play on the words “prune” and “clean”. These represent two related Greek words, *kathairō* and *katharos*, but the force of this is lost in the English translation. Hence the connection between the two sentences is lost. The point is that we have been made “clean” by the word of God, which functions as a pruning knife (cf. two-edged sword, Heb.4:12) to remove those branches which hinder the growth and fruitfulness of the vine.

Jesus goes on to say, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you” (v.7). Here the Lord throws us a challenge. If God is not real, you can ask Him for anything but He will not answer you any more than a wall will answer you if you pray to it.

The Lord Jesus is saying, “If you fulfill this condition—if you abide in me and my words abide in you—ask what you will and it shall be done for you.” It is wonderful to abide in the Lord! He gives us a great challenge: “Dream what you will, ask what you will, and it shall be granted to you.” If we live in him and he in us, *whatever we ask will be in harmony with his will.*

The basis of his promise in v.7 is seen in the next verse, “By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples” (NASB). The proof of our being his disciples is seen in our spiritual fruitfulness.

## What is abiding?

What does it mean to abide in the Lord? As we mentioned in a previous chapter, “abide” (*menō*, μένω) occurs 40 times in John’s gospel and 24 times in First John. The total in all the Johannine writings adds up to 68 occurrences, most of which are used in a spiritual sense. There are only 52 occurrences of this word in the rest of the New Testament. With a few exceptions, these carry the ordinary literal meaning and are not used in a specifically spiritual sense. Hence abiding is evidently an important concept in John’s writings.

The massive (over 2000 pages) Liddell, Scott, Jones’ *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1973) provides the following main definitions for *menō* (μένω): “1. *stand fast*, in battle; 2. *stay at home, lodge*; 3. *stay, tarry*; 4. of things, *to be lasting, remain, stand, stable, permanent*”.

Similarly, Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1979, Chicago) gives these main definitions: “*remain, stay, abide; live, dwell; last, endure, continue*”.

James Hastings’ *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, though an old work, remains important to this day. In discussing the meaning of the word under the heading



“Abiding,” and examining its various definitions, the dictionary arrives at the conclusion that “The leading idea is that of *steadfast continuance*” (italics mine).

What does “steadfast continuance” mean? It conveys the idea of remaining, staying, continuing in something or someone (in this case, Christ, or he in us) devotedly, loyally, faithfully, resolutely, unwaveringly, and perseveringly.

### **Abiding “in”**

In discussing the meaning of “abide,” it must not be overlooked that in the Johannine writings, “abide” is often used together with the word “in”. Commenting on this, Hastings remarks that John “presses the idea not only of *intimate fellowship*, but also of resultant *power and blessing*” (italics mine).

Bringing all the preceding definitions and observations together, we arrive at the conclusion that to “abide in” Christ is to live in a stable, steadfast continuance in Christ in a close and intimate fellowship.

Since abiding carries the idea of steadfast continuance, it basically means to be steadfastly faithful to one’s commitment to Christ. Accordingly, Jesus’ words could be paraphrased as: he who continues steadfastly in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. Or equivalently, *he who continues in his commitment to me and in my commitment to him, he it is that bears much fruit*. This understanding of

Jesus' teaching is surely correct, but does the Lord mean something beyond this when speaking of abiding?

## The vine-branch relationship

We need to go beyond faithful continuance because we could say, "According to my conscience, I am faithful in my commitment to the Lord. Yet I'm not bearing fruit." Is that your experience? You may be faithful in your commitment to the Lord, yet lack the spiritual depth and strength of those who abide in the Lord. Surely Jesus has more in mind than "steadfast continuance". But what is that "more"?

To answer this, let us look at John 15 itself. Verse 4 says, "Abide in me, and I in you. The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine." Here "abide" defines a vital relationship—and not just a continuance—between the vine and the branch. It is true that the branch continues steadfastly in the vine, but that doesn't fully define the vital relationship between the two. We don't normally speak of a branch "continuing steadfastly" in the vine, do we?

Let's analyze this more closely. Here "abide" describes a relationship between the vine and the branch. What kind of relationship? Is the Lord saying, "If you are related to me, and I to you, you will bear much fruit"? This statement is correct, but it is vague and in need of fuller elaboration.

The relationship between the vine and the branch exists on two levels. We can speak of the *outer* relationship and the *inner* relationship. In the outer relationship, the branch is

physically attached to the stem, whereas in the inner relationship, the life-giving sap of the vine flows into the branch. The outward connection alone does not result in fruit-bearing. The critical factor is whether the inner life flows from the vine into the branch.

### **(1) The outer connection**

Let us consider the outer connection for a moment. If a branch is externally attached to a stem, there may or may not be an inner connection. If we glue a branch onto a stem with strong epoxy glue, we will have established an outer bond or relationship. An external bond has been created but not an inner relationship.

Or we could graft a branch into the stem by making a cut in the stem and inserting the branch in it. Grafting as an agricultural procedure has been known for thousands of years. Grafting is mentioned in Romans 11:17ff which speaks of a wild olive branch grafted in an olive tree.

The gardener's immediate concern is whether the graft has "taken". If the graft has not taken, the branch will wither and die because it cannot draw the life sap from the stem. But if the graft is accepted, life will flow from the stem into the branch.

Grafting as a medical procedure (e.g., skin grafting) is also well-known. A heart transplant is a form of grafting. Sometimes the body accepts the graft, sometimes it rejects it.

Hence a living connection must go deeper than a mere sticking on; it must involve an internal graft in the stem. But the question remains as to whether the graft has taken or not. This governs whether it will bear fruit or not. If there is no fruit, it would indicate that the graft has not taken, or that the branch is diseased and dying. Branches, like human beings, are prone to diseases. We see that in the fruit trees. Sometimes when we see a diseased branch, we cut it off lest the disease spreads to the rest of the tree.

## **(2) Mere outward connection to Christ**

An outer connection does not necessarily imply a vital, inner connection. Applying this to the Christian life, it means that you may have been baptized, or made a profession of faith, or are doing things commonly associated with being a member of the body of Christ, the church. There is undoubtedly an outer connection, but is there an inner connection? And how strong is it? Are you able to draw life from Christ? That is the point we are getting at.

You may have been visibly attached to Christ through baptism, but the question remains: Is Christ's life flowing into your inner being? That is why abiding is so important. If the life of Christ, together with the power of that life, is not flowing into us, the inner connection would be missing and we could hardly speak of abiding. The vital thing is the inner connection rather than the outer one.

An internal connection implies that an external connection exists, but the converse is not necessarily true. If

you belong to a church, there is definitely an external connection, but it doesn't prove an internal connection with Christ. Having an external connection with the church, or having the label "Christian," does not necessarily mean that God's power is operating in your life by His indwelling presence.

That being the case, "steadfast continuance" must characterize the *inner* relationship with Christ rather than the outer, if it is to adequately express what Jesus is saying to us. One can, for example, be faithful in the outward sense of attending church regularly. If we never skip church on Sunday, is that not steadfast continuance? The outer connection is not in question, but whether there is an *inner* steadfast continuance is another matter.

Outward faithfulness is not the same as inward faithfulness. A married couple may be faithful outwardly in the sense of not committing adultery. Outwardly they are faithful to their covenant, but the inner communication may be dead. The outer connection is evident. They are legally married, and they wear matching wedding rings. They can produce the legal documents to certify the external connection, but the inward connection may be weak or even dead.

Abiding is not just an outward connection; it is to live in a vital relationship with Christ. It doesn't mean to live in Christ as one would live in a house. That wouldn't make sense because Christ is not a physical building. We are not talking about dwelling physically but about relationships. It

is not just living in Christ in some vague sense, but living in a vital internal inter-communication with Christ by which his life flows into us.

Because his life is the bedrock of our lives, supplying us with the spiritual atmosphere which we breathe, we can say that Christ is the *spiritual* environment in which we live. Physically we live in the world; spiritually we live in Christ. That is why it is said that we are “in the world, but not of it”.

It is now clear that speaking of an inner “steadfast continuance,” while correct, is quite inadequate to express what the Lord is saying. “Continuance” in itself does not adequately describe the relationship between a vine and its branches. There cannot just be continuance, but the continuance of something specific if the relationship is to remain vital or living. What is that something? Surely there needs to be the continuance of the flow of the sap (life) from the vine to the branches, if the branches are to live, grow, and bear fruit.

The inner-outer contrast applies also to the church. In the church there are those who attend cell groups and Bible study groups. There may be an outward connection and even an outward faithfulness in terms of church attendance, but there may or may not be an inner relationship among the people. We know from observation that many churches lack inner communication among the people. It is possible to have an outer relationship with Christ through the church, yet without a vital inner communication with him and his people.

### (3) The danger of a mere outward connection

1John 2:18-19 shows us the danger of having only an external connection:

Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.

To our shock, John says that antichrists do not come from the heathens outside the church, but from *within* the church! Antichrists have a Christian origin and identity.

“They went out from us but they were not of us.” This puzzling statement is easy to understand if we distinguish the two types of connections. All antichrists have been associated with the church at one time or another. They have a definite external connection to the church of God, but lack a living internal connection to Christ himself, even if they did have a weak relationship with him in the past. If your relationship with the Lord is weak, you are in grave danger of being severed from Christ and falling from grace (Gal.5:4), and even one day ceasing to be a Christian all together. Worse of all, you may end up being an antichrist.

Some of the most hostile enemies of the gospel are not the unbelievers but people who used to be “Christians”. They attended Christian schools and were brought up in Christian families. Once these people turn away from the gospel, they become a great danger to the church because

they can boast of a connection to the church. As ex-Christians, they know something about the life of the church and pose a danger to it.

Those of us who pastor churches know from experience that the people in church who have weak internal connections with God and with His church can easily become grumblers, slanderers, and malcontents (Jude 1:16, etc). The weak internal connection leads to a defeated life which in turn breeds unhappiness. They vent their dissatisfaction on the church, making it take the brunt of their discontent.

Such people are a danger to the church already *while they are still in the church*, indeed long before they leave it. There are people of this kind who cause problems to the church even if they decide to stay, having ensconced themselves or entrenched themselves in a position of authority. 3 John 9-10 is an example of this dangerous state of affairs in one of the churches.

Therefore to have only an external connection with God and His people is potentially dangerous. Not only do people of this kind fail to produce fruit, even worse they could become active enemies of God and His church.

#### **(4) Internal relationship with the Lord**

In speaking of “abiding,” Jesus stresses the internal relationship. But what is the character of this relationship? How do we communicate with the Lord?



An inner relationship certainly involves effective communication with the Lord. But how do we attain it? When we pray to God the Father, do we feel that our prayer is going on a one-way street? We pray, but it is all one-way traffic. To use a different picture, our radio transmitter may be working but not our receiver. Our monologue then becomes boring even to ourselves.

How do we abide in Christ, the Son of God? How does the life sap flow into us and bring forth the fruit of the Spirit? How can his life flow into us when our hearts are not one with his? There has to be two-way traffic, two-way communication. Can he get through to us if we are not getting through to him?

### **“If my words abide in you”**

Several times Jesus says, “Abide in me, and I in you.” Then suddenly in verse 7, he shifts the concept of abiding towards abiding in his words: “If you abide in me and my words abide in you.” In what sense do his words abide or live in us? You may say, “Oh, read the Bible and memorize Scripture passages.” That is partially true, but it is nowhere near the heart of what Jesus is talking about.

*“If my words abide in you.”* A few verses earlier, Jesus speaks of his word: “You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you” (v.3). In the space of five verses, he speaks twice of his “word”. (These represent two different Greek words, *logos* and *rhēma*, but we don’t need to go into

the technicalities here.) Suffice it to say that the “word” of Jesus is vital to abiding.

Again, the idea of “steadfast continuance” is inadequate to define “abide” adequately, for in what sense do spoken words continue steadfastly in us? The term makes sense only when it relates to *life*. If the statement is understood as, “If my words *live* in you constantly,” then its meaning begins to emerge. The words of Jesus convey life; they are more than the printed text or the spoken language. Colossians 3:16 portrays the word of Christ as being alive: “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*” Let his word live in you, dwell in you, reside in you. This makes sense only if Christ’s word is something *living*, something that has life and conveys life. In John 6:63 the Lord says, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”.

### **Inexhaustible depth of God’s word**

On a recent trip to Ottawa, I bought a book on theology, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics in the Early Church*. Having read the book, I don’t need to read it a second time because in the one reading I have taken note of its substance. I have, as it were, squeezed the book like an orange and drunk the juice. What more can you do with it? Squeeze it a second time? You may get a few more drops, but you will be poorly rewarded for your labor. The same is true of other books I have read; I don’t recall reading any book a second time.

But the Bible is different. I have been reading the Bible for more than four decades, yet new riches continue to flow. I have read John chapter 15 many times ever since I was a young Christian. But every time I read it, I discover new depths of meaning. You cannot do this with ordinary human writing. The author of the book I just mentioned is a very learned scholar who studied in Germany, England, and the United States. He is a theologian, a seminary professor, and one of the more distinguished of North American biblical scholars. Yet the one reading was enough. In fact I probably didn't learn very much from the one reading either, because the subject was quite familiar to me. If I were to read it again and again for three months, I will become utterly tired of the book.

Most people are intelligent enough not to have to go through the same material again and again. By contrast, you can read Scripture carefully and thoroughly, and the next time around you will discover new riches. You will find this to be the case every time you read it attentively, and meditate on it with your heart. "For the word of God is living and active" (Heb.4:12). The word of God is alive and inexhaustibly rich. The Bible is not a mere human book. Understanding the Bible is not a matter of intellectual capacity but of spiritual vitality and insight.

In the passage on the vine and its branches, Jesus says,

"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you

friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (Jn.15:15).

Do we understand this statement? It takes only a basic knowledge of English to understand it. But if I should ask you whether you understand it *spiritually* and not just intellectually, I think few people would say, “Yes, I understand it.”

“All that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” Is that true in your experience? Has the Lord made known to you all the things that the Father has shown him? Probably not for most people. The word “you” is plural here, indicating that he makes all things known to his disciples and his church collectively. He does not necessarily reveal everything to one person. But the question remains as to how much he has revealed to you individually. This, again, is not a matter of knowledge but of life.

God’s word, unlike a human book, cannot be apprehended solely on the intellectual level. It speaks at spiritual levels we cannot understand unless it becomes experiential truth for us. Or let us consider something more elementary. Romans 6 says that you have “died”. If you haven’t died, you can read Romans 6 again and again yet fail to grasp the spiritual meaning of the statement. You haven’t died, so how can the statement make sense to you? But if you have died, the meaning would be clear to you even if you don’t understand it in all its depth.

When Jesus says, “Abide in me,” do we know what that means? We may know the dictionary definition of “abide,”

but do we know its inner content? We won't unless we have a living inner connection with Christ. The Lord's words are alive, but do they live in us? If not, they will remain unintelligible to us and cannot benefit us.

## **How does God communicate with us?**

Let us now consider the ways in which God the Father communicates with us. This matter is of vital importance in regard to abiding in Jesus Christ, Son of God, and he in us.

### **(1) God speaks to us by His word**

God speaks to us first and foremost through the word He has taught us. When we pray to Him or commune with Him, He responds to us. How? By the word He has spoken. He has already given His answer, if we have ears to hear.

Imagine that you are sitting before God quietly. I would often sit in a reasonably comfortable position for prayer, because if we are in an uncomfortable position we won't be able to pray for long. If your knees or your back starts aching, you will be distracted from your fellowship with God and, after a while, will be unable to continue.

It is very good, however, that we begin each day with a time of prayer on our knees if we have no physical disabilities or injuries which hinder us from doing so. You can remain in this position for as long as you are not distracted by pain or severe discomfort, which affects your praying.

It is of great importance to me that I express my worship and total heart obedience to God in this way daily, even if just for a limited time because of physical constraints. It is certain that the apostle Paul prayed in this way even if he didn't necessarily pray only in this way, for he says in Ephesians 3:14, "I bow my knees before the Father". Those who have no back pain or other physical problems, and prefer to pray in a kneeling position, are of course at liberty to do so.

2 Samuel 7:18 records that David, a man after God's own heart, "sat before Yahweh" to speak to Him (also 1Chr. 17:16). It was evidently a fairly long prayer, the essence of which is recorded in verses 18-29.

When we are sitting quietly and praying to God, we tend to keep on talking unless we are people of few words. Soon we will run out of things to say. There is a limit to how long you can carry on like that. Soon you will get tired of talking. "Lord, can I take a rest from talking? Will You please say a few words to me because I'm getting tired of listening to myself?" I am sure that this has been your experience if you have ever tried to pray earnestly. We finally quiet down, and say humbly, "Please, Lord, it's Your turn. Why the silence? Aren't You going to say anything?" Does God like our voices so much that He keeps quiet while we keep on talking?

Well, amazingly, God has already spoken. "*Before they call, I will answer*" (Isa.65:24). And where is His answer? It has been there all along if only we had ears to hear! What will God say to us that He hasn't already said in His Word?

In the Scriptures He has already told us everything we need to know about how to live the spiritual life. The problem is that we read but do not see, listen but do not hear.

## **(2) The Spirit brings the Lord's word to our remembrance**

What then am I supposed to do? Read my Bible? The point is not in the mere reading. One chapter earlier, Jesus had already dealt with this when he said,

These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (John 4:25-26)

Note these vital words: “Bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.” The Lord Jesus has told us everything we need to know, whether about discipleship or the Christian life. That is where the Holy Spirit comes into the picture. He will “bring to your remembrance” all that Jesus has said to us. When we pray, the Spirit of God will communicate with us, bringing the Lord's words into our hearts and minds.

But where do I begin in the words of Jesus? Which passage is applicable? Well, that is precisely why we need the Holy Spirit to bring the Lord's words into our hearts. That presupposes that we have already heard what he has said and know what he has taught. If we don't even know what he had said in the Scriptures, there would be nothing for us to remember. We can't remember what we didn't know in the first place. We must first listen to, or read, the words of Jesus

attentively, only then can the Holy Spirit bring it to our remembrance. The Lord's words cannot abide in us if they haven't even entered our lives.

“Remembrance” means more than just refreshing the memory. The word “remember,” as used by John, means that the Spirit of God will bring to our minds the *significance* of the word for our particular situation (see John 2:17,22; 12:16; 15:20; 16:4); it is not simply recalling something from memory. The Spirit will cause the message to suddenly take on vivid significance in a way we have not seen before.

When we abide in Christ, we connect with him in an internal relationship that takes place in the depths of our being, in our hearts and spirits. There the Holy Spirit takes his word and applies it to us in a way that speaks to us in whatever situation we are in.

Apply this and you will be amazed at how Jesus' words speak to you. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God—whose Temple we are, and who indwells us as a living presence—will take the words that Jesus has spoken, and apply it to you. It is not merely the printed text but the spirit of the message that comes alive to you. Suddenly you get very excited. At least I do.

When I meditate on the Lord's words, many times God's Spirit suddenly opens them up to me, showing me how they apply to my situation. It is not just a matter of memorization because even if I remember a passage, I may not see its significance. The Spirit reveals to me the inner meaning of the



passage. “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

When you visit a museum or a tourist site, the guide will explain everything to you step by step. Previously you saw nothing significant about a certain site, but when the guide explains it to you, you see its significance. Previously you could have walked past the place and see nothing. But now, because the guide has shown you its significance, the whole place “comes alive”. This is what “remembrance” means.

This is not the only way in which the Spirit speaks to us. But as a rule, we need to take this step before going on to the next step.

### **(3) Direct communication**

What is that next step? John 16:12 implies a progression: “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” There are things that Jesus hasn’t told us yet, so these things cannot be brought to our remembrance. We might not be ready for what he has to say to us now, but when we are ready, or when the need is there, the Spirit will implement the next step: *He will speak to us directly, without necessarily reminding us of any particular passage of Scripture.* He will reveal to us what we need to know.

This stage is further along the road. It is for those whose ears have been attuned to hearing the truth in God’s word through the Spirit’s “reminding”. As we progress, God will reveal things to us directly. But it is crucial to point out that *what God reveals in direct communication is always in perfect*

*harmony with His Word*, the Scriptures. If it contradicts the Scriptures, it is not from God.

What things will God reveal to those who commune with Him? In Acts chapter 9, for example, the Lord spoke to “a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias” (v.10) and instructed him what to do for Saul, the persecutor of the church who was soon to become known as Paul, the apostle. The Lord even revealed to Ananias something about Paul’s future ministry.

Agabus the prophet (Acts 11:28-29; 21:10-11) knew through the Spirit that a famine was coming to Judea, and that the church must prepare for it.

The Holy Spirit communicates things to those who obey God and have become sensitized to God’s word. The Lord said to Paul in a vision, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack you and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10).

God taught Peter the significance of clean and unclean things when He said to him, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (Acts 10:15).

The Spirit of God may speak to you through a vision or a dream, or directly. Not long ago, after I had been awake for some time, God communicated with me, warning me that the time for the church in the world is drawing to a close, and that momentous events will soon take place. I sat up in bed and pondered the things which God was showing me. Suddenly the words “wars and rumors of wars”

(Mt.24:6; Mk.13:7) appeared before my eyes in a life-like vision, so much so that I began to sweat at the sight of these things.

If we let the Lord speak to us through the word he has spoken (and applied to us by the Holy Spirit), in due time he will speak to us on other matters. The message to me in that vision was that changes are rapidly taking place in the world; these developments are bringing the world inexorably to the apocalyptic conclusion of this age. They are the very things that Jesus forewarned us about in Matthew 24. The message is: “Press on. The time for the church is short. The relatively peaceful circumstances that you are enjoying now will not last much longer. Press on urgently with the work entrusted to you.”

Wars hinder the preaching of the gospel. That is why we need to pray for peace (cf. 1Tim.2:1-4). But peace is not something that can remain in the world for long. We are now enjoying a period of relative peace, but the Lord’s warning is that the time is not far away when we will be affected in some way by momentous changes in the world. The warning is somewhat like the famine warning given to Agabus for the sake of the church. These warnings reveal how much God loves and cares for His redeemed people.

To summarize, what has abiding got to do with regeneration and renewal? So long as we abide in Christ, we will not sin. But the moment we stop abiding in him, we will find ourselves sliding into sin. Hence we need to abide in him moment by moment. Then we will have neither the

desire nor the inclination to sin, and his life and power will flow into us and bring forth an abundance of eternal fruit.

## Chapter 11



# BEING LIKE CHRIST: STANDING IN THE GAP

## The goal of renewal

**W**hat is the ultimate goal of renewal? Without a doubt it is perfection in the Biblical sense, which is to become like Christ. Perfection is a demonstration of God's overwhelming power in our lives by which sin is consistently overcome and we are being transformed by the Spirit ever more into the image of Christ.

Sin is to be feared because it destroys our relationship with God, the Source of life and every good thing (James 1:17). Sin breaches our relationship with God, creating a wide gap between Him and us. Separated from Him, we are cut off from life and from every blessing that originates from Him. Only when the breach is repaired, the gap is closed,

and we are reconciled with God, can we have life—eternal life. To make this a reality is no easy thing, but Jesus in his self-giving love came to accomplish this very thing for us through his life, his teaching, and above all his death on the cross.

When we receive the new life from God, do we just sit back and enjoy it, or are we called to follow God in His “ministry of reconciliation,” as expressed in 2Cor.5:18: God has “reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”? How can we do the work of Christ—reconciliation—unless we are like him?

The ultimate aim of perfection is *to be like Christ*. What does this mean in practice? Imitate “gentle Jesus, meek and mild,” as a hymn puts it? That is certainly included, but is that the ultimate goal of perfection? Can we describe the goal in more dynamic terms? By “dynamic” we are thinking of a task or mission that we are given to fulfill in this generation. Are we to be meek and mild as an end in itself? Or are these qualities, among others, meant to accomplish something greater in us for the sake of God’s glory and the welfare of His people? It is fine to be “nice guys” but that hardly defines our mission in these last days as disciples of Jesus.

What does it mean to be like Christ? There are two aspects to this: *to be as he is, and to do as he does*. Both are crucial. The latter—to do as he does—would mean that God assigns us a task that He had earlier assigned to Jesus. The purpose of regeneration and renewal is not merely to become

nice people, but to fulfill Christ's saving mission in the world through God's indwelling Spirit.

Scripture doesn't just speak of becoming like Christ in some general sense of being good people. We must go beyond that, to be like him in following him, taking up our cross and, if necessary, laying down our lives for God's people and for the salvation of the world. We cannot atone for people's sins as Jesus did, yet we are to receive his atoning life and transmit it to others. Unless we live as Jesus lived and fulfill the mission that he fulfilled, we are not truly Christ-like, not even if we are meek and mild.

Catch a vision of our task and calling. Living sacrificially for Christ and for the church of God is something that needs to become, by God's grace, a vision in our hearts. Few people have a vision today. If we don't have a vision, we wouldn't know where we are going or understand the purpose of being Christ-like.

## **Doing the works of Jesus**

To discuss this point more fully, we turn to John 14:12, where the Lord Jesus says:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to my Father. (NKJV)

Anyone who believes in Jesus—any disciple of Jesus—will do the works that he does. A Christian is not only called to have a Christ-like character, but also to do as the Lord did,

continuing in his saving ministry. The Lord does not define discipleship only in terms of having his character, though that is necessary, but stresses that those who believe in him “will” do—not “may” do—the works that he does.

The “will do” (future tense) carries a predictive and promissory force. It conveys the sense of inevitability for the one who believes in Jesus and who, by the work of the Spirit, is becoming like him. It is not just a vague possibility. Doing his work is not an option that we might choose for our spare time or when we are in the right mood. Everyone who truly believes in Jesus “will” inevitably do the works that he did.

Many people see this verse as a great challenge. But they also see it as something optional, as if we can choose whether to do as the Lord did. How easily we say, “Lord, I’ll give the matter some consideration. When I retire and have some spare time on my hands, I may start doing what you have done.” This is wrong. Whether you have been born again can be seen by whether you are doing what he did, in the way he wants you to. This is Christ-likeness in dynamic terms, seen in a self-giving life that accomplishes something in the world to the glory of God.

### **(1) “Works”: Revealing God to the world through Christ’s life, Christ’s words, and the cross**

Jesus’ statement in John 14:12 is often understood in terms of miracles, as if he had said, “You will also do the miracles that I do, because I go to the Father.” A basic principle of



exegesis is to examine the context. In the preceding chapter we read:

Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.” Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times” (John 13:36-38, NIV)

Here Jesus speaks of his departure, that is, to die on the cross and return to the Father. This is the “works” he came to do. Enemies were conspiring to kill him with the aim of ending his ministry, his work. Peter pledged him faithfulness unto death—“I will lay down my life for you”—but Jesus helped him to see his true self: “Will you die for me? You are genuinely willing but not ready. It won’t be today or tomorrow or next week that you’ll be ready for this challenge. You will deny me three times before the rooster crows.”

Peter hadn’t yet reached the level of being ready to participate in his Lord’s “works”. His heroic words show that he didn’t even realize how far he was from being ready.

After Judas had gone out into the night to betray Jesus, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” (Jn. 13:31). His being “glorified” refers to his being “lifted up” (12:32)—that is, lifted up on the cross. By his death he glorified the Father. This was the “work” he came into the world to do. “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that You gave me to do” (John 17:4).

Besides the cross, the Lord Jesus engaged in another work of great importance for our salvation: proclaiming God's word. In John 14:10, just before the verse we are studying (v.12), "works" is mentioned again: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does His works."

Note the connection between "works" and the "words that I say to you". In this aspect of Jesus' ministry, doing God's "works" refers to speaking and teaching.

From the whole context of John 14:12, it is clear that Jesus' life, his teaching, and his death are his "works," his ministry. All these have to do with revealing the Father: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (v.9). Unless Jesus reveals God to us, we will have no way of knowing and believing in God, and no path to eternal life. "And this is eternal life, that they know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3).

## **(2) No references to miracles**

In this section of John's gospel, Jesus speaks of revealing the Father in his own person, his teachings, and his death, yet there are no references to miracles. In following Jesus, our mission is likewise to communicate God's life and God's teaching to the multitudes. The doing of miracles is not the primary concern, though they are not excluded.

Let's get this point clear in our minds lest we be swayed by well-meaning people, especially our charismatic friends, who interpret John 14:12 wholly in terms of doing miracles.

It is possible that in serving God, we may find ourselves in a situation in which we are called to do the miraculous. Whether miracles are done *regularly* through us will depend on the spiritual gifts that God has given each one of us. If the Lord's statement, "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do," is limited to miracles, it cannot possibly apply to all believers. Paul says, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues" (1Cor.12:29-30). A rhetorical question expects "no" as the answer.

The mission to which we are called is not primarily concerned with miracles but making God known through our lives, our teaching His word, and our suffering for His sake. The purpose of our works is to lead people to eternal life in Christ.

Many Christians are unaware of their calling as Jesus' disciples, much less the aspect of suffering in that calling. They cannot make sense of Paul when he says that in his own sufferings, "I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col.1:24). We are called to partake in Christ's saving work, and even in the fellowship of his suffering. This vital teaching has largely been lost today, and that is all the more reason to restore it. For "to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake" (Phil.1:29).

Christ revealed God not only by his teaching, but above all by his self-giving life and by his death on the cross for our

salvation. Shortly before he spoke the words in John 14:12, he had already said:

“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” But he was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which he was to die. (John 12:32,33)

“For the Son of God did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

If Jesus did not come to be served but to serve, why would we think that we are here to be served rather than to serve? And what does he mean by serving? It is giving his life as a ransom for many, this being his “works”.

### **(3) Having a share in Christ’s saving work**

*Whoever* believes in Jesus will do the works that he did. This statement is not limited to “elite” Christians but to all disciples. Hence we too have a part in Christ’s saving ministry.

Jesus says to his Father in his high priestly prayer, “I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work which You gave Me to do” (John 17:4). How did Jesus glorify the Father on earth? By accomplishing the work the Father had entrusted to him, which is to give himself for the salvation of mankind through his life, his teaching, his death. We are called to the same work, namely, the saving ministry the Father had given to the Son. Jesus also says, “As You sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (v.18), a point that is brought out again after his resurrection, “Peace

be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”  
(John 20:21)

To be like Christ is to have his saving mindset, which is expressed powerfully in Paul’s words, “that I may by all means save some” (1Cor.9:22). This was a slogan of Paul’s life. He wanted to save people by all means, just as his Lord came to save people by all means.

Jesus redeemed humankind by the blood of the cross, reconciling man with God and making it possible for everyone to become a whole new person living in communion with God, and to bear abundant fruit through the Spirit, to God’s glory.

How will those who have never had a chance to hear the good news believe in it, and through that faith enter into its blessings? How will they hear if we don’t bring the good news to them? Whose responsibility will it be if they perish without having had a chance to hear? Will it not be ours? Christ provided the water of life; it is our responsibility to bring it those who will perish without it.

Paul was not like some modern evangelists who are content with getting converts. Many evangelists leave the new converts to fend for themselves, many of whom do not survive. But Paul strived and toiled to present every man mature (perfect) in Christ (Col.1:28). He labored so that they may become Christ-like so that they themselves may live a self-giving life that communicates Christ’s life to others. The aim is to establish a new community, the church,

which is not just a community of the saved, but a community of the saving.

## **A picture of Christ's saving work: Standing in the gap**

Now that we have a clearer picture of the saving work that Jesus came to accomplish, is there a concrete way to portray his ministry in picture language that even a child can understand?

The Old Testament gives us one such vivid picture: that of a city rendered defenseless because its walls have been breached.<sup>27</sup> In that desperate situation, a courageous person comes forward to stand in the gap to repair it. Historically, this is what happened with Nehemiah, who for this reason is a type of Christ. From this perspective, the book of Nehemiah ceases to be an ordinary book of limited scope about a relatively obscure period in Israel's history, but one that reveals what it means to stand in the breach.

Sin breaches our relationship with God. "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). Sin creates a wide gap between God

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<sup>27</sup> Graphic descriptions of this are found in Job 16:14; 30:14f; Ezek. 26:10f, and other passages. Tearing down houses in order to rebuild and strengthen sections of the walls of Jerusalem (Isaiah 22:9,10) shows the importance of repairing the breaches.

and us. Who can repair the breach? Who can stand between God and us? Who can mediate between God and man?

Prophets and priests were mediators. The prophet spoke to the people on God's behalf, the priest offered sacrifices to God on the people's behalf. Moses served as a prophet, Aaron served as a priest. Together they formed the mediatorial link between God and man, for one of them (the prophet) spoke for God, and the other (the priest) represented man. Each represented one side, one party. (Of course Moses also took on an aspect of the priestly ministry by interceding for the people.)

Man is caught in the vise-like grip of a double predicament: man is alienated from God and ignorant of Him, and man comes under the guilt and power of sin. The darkness of spiritual ignorance and that of bondage to sin both result in death, so they have to be dealt with. Jesus dealt with the bane of spiritual ignorance through his life and teaching, and with the evil of sin through his death and resurrection.

The cross lies at the center of his mediation: his teaching points to it and his resurrection vindicates it. It was on the cross that Jesus with outstretched arms reconciled God and man, but also humanity and all things on earth and in heaven (Col.1:20). Jesus is the glorious and perfect Mediator. All other mediators are types that foreshadowed him.

## **“Standing in the gap” in the Old Testament**

To better understand the ministry of salvation in terms of standing in the gap, let us look at an Old Testament picture in Ezekiel 22:30. Here God says to the great prophet Ezekiel:

“I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none.”

This verse is important to me and I hope also to you, for it reveals God’s deep longing. God, as it were, is opening His heart to us: “Look into My heart. Feel what I feel, and empathize with My thoughts; for I do not want the people to perish in their sins.” To understand the background to this, let us read verses 28-29:

And her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, “Thus says the Lord God,” when Yahweh has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced oppression and committed robbery, and they have wronged the poor and the needy, and have oppressed the sojourner without justice.

God was searching through the land of Israel, which was corrupted by sin and rebellion, for just *one* man. He said, “I looked for a man among them,” yet could not find one person in all Israel to do His work. Hence,

“I have poured out My indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; their way I have brought upon their heads,” declares the Lord God. (v.31)



Do you feel God’s heart in these remarkable verses? Can you, as it were, put your hand on God’s pulse and feel it? Israel—a people whom God delivered out of Egypt by His mighty hand, whom He led into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, whom He made into a nation, to whom He sent His prophets, and with whom He established a special relationship—this same people had gone the way of sin, committing extortion and robbery. This was the sorry situation of Israel, a people redeemed by God and called to proclaim His glory in the world.

God was obliged to stretch out His hand with the sword of judgment, yet we also see the anguish of His heart. He didn’t want to destroy Israel. He was looking for just one person to stand in the breach so that He wouldn’t have to destroy the land and His people, but there was no one. God’s righteous wrath against sin gave Him no alternative but to act in judgment: to “consume them with the fire of My wrath”.

## **The breaching of the walls in Israel**

Let’s try to understand the picture of a person who stands in the breach. A breach is simply a big gap in the walls of a city.

Why do city walls collapse? One reason is the failure to maintain them. Walls, like buildings, need constant maintenance. Without proper maintenance, they will eventually crumble.

Another reason is that sections of city walls are sometimes knocked down in battle. In ancient times, an enemy force would typically attack a wall with heavy battering rams. These were long poles made from heavy tree trunks, with the front end having a metal ram's head with two horns. That is why they are called "battering rams". This great pole would be suspended by strong ropes from a wooden arch such that it could swing back and forth.

To attack a city, the soldiers would transport the battering ram with its structure mounted on a platform with wheels. They would push the device up against a city wall, and the soldiers would heave back the heavy pole and slam it into the wall. The great metal head would pound its way into the wall as the stones slowly crumble. The battering rams, also called siege engines, would slowly break through the walls. Meanwhile the city's defenders would shoot arrows and throw down objects such as rocks, from the top of the walls. But it is hard to defeat the enemy with this method because there would often be a defensive roof over the battering ram.

If you read about some of the ancient battles, you would know that the sound of the battering rams sickened the stomachs of the inhabitants. Imagine that your city is surrounded by enemies, and you hear the sound of battering rams in action. Boom! Boom! Every blow causes your stomach to cramp, and you wonder when the wall will crumble. The people inside the city are on edge waiting for the moment of destiny. When it finally arrives, the enemy

warriors will pour in through the breach like a flood. It will spell the end of the city and possibly the nation. Sadly, this kind of thing has happened all too often.

The walls of Jerusalem have been breached, and the city is left defenseless. The wall is the main line of defense, and once it collapses there is no more security or salvation. The enemy will pour in like a flood, bringing death and destruction.

Those who have visited Masada in Israel would know of the tragedy that unfolded there some nineteen centuries ago. The Jews thought they were secure on the rocky heights of Masada, but the Romans built a ramp right up the mountain and up to the walls that crowned it, and pushed up the siege engines. Soon the Jewish defenders of Masada had that sickening feeling in their stomachs as they heard the pounding of the battering rams. Boom! Boom! Every boom brought home a nauseating reminder of imminent death.

And what did the defenders of Masada do? They built another wall inside the outer wall so that when the outer wall collapses, they would have a second line of defense. But that did not stop the Romans. They bashed down the second wall as well. And what did the people in Masada do? They committed suicide. I am reminded of the words of Ezekiel: *“Why will you die, O house of Israel?”* (18:31; 33:11)

Ezekiel 22:30 says that God searched all Israel for a man who could rebuild the wall and stand before Him in the gap on behalf of the land so that He wouldn't have to destroy it, but He couldn't find one such person.

To gain a clearer picture, let us backtrack to Isaiah 5, to the picture of God building a nation: The Lord had a vineyard (= Israel) located on a fertile hill. He dug the vineyard and cleared it of stones, and planted choice vines in it. He built a defence watchtower to protect the vineyard, and hewed out a wine vat. But the final outcome was tragic. Israel sinned grievously, and Yahweh said, “O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah ... what more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes, did it produce worthless ones?” (vv.3-4)

The vines produced sour grapes. Israel was a fruitless nation, so the holy God of Israel had to bring judgment upon His own people:

So now let Me tell you what I am going do to My vineyard; I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. And I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up; I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it. (vv.5-6)

God will judge all sinners whether they are His people or not, whether they are believers or unbelievers. It is written:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” (1Peter 4:17,18)

## The Church, the glory of Christ?

Jerusalem is sometimes called, especially in hymns, Jerusalem the Golden. This exquisite name was inspired by the golden reflection of the sunlight upon the walls of Jerusalem.

The Psalms sing of Jerusalem as the place where Yahweh, who is light, dwells (Psalm 43:3; 102:16). Isaiah speaks of Yahweh as “the light of Israel” (10:17). Israel was to be a light to the nations, with the nations coming to her light. The prophet Isaiah says, “Yahweh will rise upon you, and His glory will appear upon you. And nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isaiah 60:2,3). The light from Mount Zion—the city of God set on a hill—will be visible to the world and will draw all nations.

Jesus applies this picture to his disciples and the church, who are meant to be the light of the world, the spiritual Jerusalem that cannot be hidden (Mt.5:14). God’s people are the new Jerusalem that reflects His glory. Jerusalem is a representation of the church (Heb.12:22,23; Gal.4:25,26). Paul says:

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

The church in all her glory! Given the spiritual condition of so many churches today, we might think that Paul is referring to something in the future, in heaven. But is there no foretaste of it in the present? What about the words, “that he might sanctify her”? Is that also in the future? The next sentence refers to something that has already taken place: “having cleansed her”. There is a past and a future but no present? Or are we saying that the cleansing is not effective until we get to heaven? Is sanctification or holiness merely a status without a corresponding reality in practical life?

The final and perfect fulfillment of those words in Ephesians will certainly be in heaven; only then will we be totally without “spot or wrinkle”. But does it mean there is no foretaste of this purity in the church on earth in the present age? Does it mean that the church has no discernible spiritual glory while on earth?

### **Where there is light, there is glory**

Glory and light are closely related in Scripture. Where there is no glory, there is no light. Where there is no light, there is no glory. If the church has no glory, it won't have light. Yet Paul says to believers: “You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). He does not merely say “you were in darkness” but “you were darkness”. Nor does he say “you are in the light” but “you are light”.

Paul's dynamic view of the gospel stands in stark contrast to our anemic understanding of it. That is why many Christians have a hard time understanding Paul's letters. Yet he is only repeating what the Lord himself stated: "You are the light of the world" (Mt.5:14) just as Jesus is the Light of the world (Jn.8:12).

Does the church today function as light? Does it reveal God's glory? The reputation of the church is so bad today that it is hard to get some clear-minded people to go to church.

Paul in his own day could speak without shame or apology of the church as the glory of God, even if the church hadn't yet attained to perfection. Can we say the same today? In Ephesians 3:21 Paul says, "To Him be the glory in the church and in Jesus Christ"—in that order! Paul is saying that God's glory is manifested at the present time through the church, the glory which is also in Jesus Christ. God is now manifested to the world through the church, the body of Christ. Can we speak of the church in the same glowing terms without shame or embarrassment?

Israel at one time showed forth the glory of God. In David's time, the reputation of Israel's glory spread far and wide. During Solomon's reign, the queen of Sheba traveled a great distance with a large retinue to listen to his wisdom and to behold the glory of the land. She had previously thought that the reports about Israel were exaggerated, but upon arriving there, she discovered that the reports had told

only half the true story (1 Kings 10:7). But that glory was short-lived.

In Christ, the church has One who is incomparably greater than Solomon (Mt.12:42; Lk.11:31), but is his glory seen in his people? Will people come from afar to seek the One greater than Solomon?

Two thousand years separate us from Paul. In his day Paul could still speak joyfully of God's glory in the church even though the church was not perfect. Can we do that today?

How the walls have fallen. Huge breaches are there for all to see. The city set on a hill can hardly be described in terms of glory. Being a city that cannot be hidden, neither can her failings. In the secular west, those who accord the church some degree of respect rather than scorn might still regard her as a cultural relic that has lost its relevance in the modern world. The choice before the church is clear: We either become the light of the world as God meant us to be, or the world will consign us to irrelevance, and God will consign us to judgment.

## **The Lord is looking for someone to stand in the gap**

Now we understand Yahweh's sentiment in Ezekiel 22:30. Do we feel God's profound disappointment when He says, "I looked through all Israel for one person to stand in the gap and to rebuild the walls, but I found no one"?



God is searching through His church in the world today, but will He find anyone to stand in the gap before the Gentile church *gets cut off*? Yes, before the non-Jewish church (the vast majority of the church today) gets cut off! That may be startling, but it is consistent with what Paul says in Romans 11:21-22:

For if God did not spare the natural branches (the Jews), neither will He spare you (Christians). Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. (Romans 11:21-22)

Paul is speaking to the church. If we Christians do not continue in God's kindness, we too will be cut off, for we will not receive preferential treatment over the Jews. "Cut off" is a warning not to take God's mercy for granted.

From Paul's warning and from the condition of the church today, we see that its days are numbered, with the days of the Gentiles drawing to a close. The city walls have come down in many places, and God is looking for someone to stand in the breach. Alas, just as God could not find a man in Israel to prevent the destruction of Israel, so today He must be having a hard time finding the right person.

Paul has disturbing words in Philippians 2:20-21: "I have no one like Timothy, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." Paul could not find anyone apart from Timothy who put the interests of Jesus Christ above all else.

His other coworkers were preoccupied with their own interests, even in the time of the early church!

Let's be honest about it. How many of you are living unreservedly for God's glory and not your own interests? Paul could find only one such person, Timothy. Thank God for people like Timothy, and also Paul, John, Peter, and others. Otherwise what would have happened to the church?

### **(1) Moses as a model of one who stood in the gap**

The history of Israel is a history of people who have stood in the gap. If no one had stood in the gap, Israel would not have lasted as long as it had. It would have disappeared long before its destruction as a nation by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. Israel survived for a long time only because in every generation, by God's grace, there was someone to stand in the gap. But in the end, there was no one to stand in the gap, and disaster came upon Israel.

Moses was one who stood in the breach. Psalm 106:23 says that "Yahweh said that He would destroy Israel" on account of the golden calf (v.19). The Psalmist continues: "Moses His chosen one, stood in the breach before Him, to turn away His wrath from destroying them."

Had Moses not stood in the breach and turned away God's wrath, the history of Israel would have ended right there. The "walls" had collapsed in the wilderness because of Israel's unfaithfulness. Moses stood in the gap to turn back God's anger, pleading with Him not to destroy Israel

(Ex.32:9-14), preferring instead that his own name be blotted from the book of life (v.32).

Moses was saying in effect, “Lord, if You’re going to destroy Israel, remember that it was You who appointed me to lead Israel. I confess my guilt because I have failed to lead Your people into righteousness.” Moses was not just being humble; he took upon himself the responsibility for Israel’s failure. That is why he said, “Blot me out, I pray Thee” (Ex.32:32) even though God did not lay blame on him. God was about to destroy Israel, and make Moses “a great nation” (v.10). But Moses said, “You made me the leader of this nation. I don’t want to be a great nation apart from them. If you’re going to destroy them, destroy me with them.”

May God spare the church if we had the spirit and attitude of Moses to say, “Lord, if You’re going to cut off the church, please don’t spare me, for I have failed to build up the walls of righteousness.”

The world won’t turn to God until the church functions again as light and becomes what God calls it to be. We must stand in the gap and build the walls of salvation, so that what is written may be fulfilled: “You shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise” (Isa.60:18).

## **(2) Sin causes the walls to collapse**

It is sin that destroys the walls, as we see in Isaiah 30:13, another striking and painful passage. The background to this is seen in verses 9-11:

For this is a rebellious people, lying sons. Sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of Yahweh; who say to the seers, “You must not see visions”; and to the prophets, “You must not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us pleasant words; prophesy illusions. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel”. (Isaiah 30:9-11)

Again a prophet of God is rebuking Israel. Its appalling spiritual condition reminds us of Paul’s statement that the time will come (and is it not here already?) when people will no longer endure sound doctrine, but will seek out teachers who will tickle their ears (2Tim.4:3). Israel only wanted to hear “pleasant words,” and urged the prophets to “prophesy illusions”. The people no longer wanted to hear the instruction of Yahweh Himself, not even things about “the Holy One of Israel”! False prophets were leading people away from the path of righteousness. In verses 13-14 Yahweh continues to say through Isaiah:

This iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant; and its breaking is like that of a potter’s vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a shard is found with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern. (ESV)

Here is a high wall that is so utterly demolished that you cannot find any fragment large enough to collect a few glowing cinders from a fireplace or to scoop up water from

a cistern. It is sin that destroys the walls, whether on the national or the individual level. It is our sins that cause the walls of our salvation to be breached and to collapse.

### **(3) A vital requirement for standing in the gap**

“Like a city that is broken into and left without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit” (Prov.25:28). A city cannot be blamed for its dilapidated condition, but a man will be blamed for his own condition. A man without self-control is like a city left defenseless by the destruction of its walls.

A person who cannot control himself will constantly fall into sin. He sees a pretty woman and lusts after her; he sees a beautiful car and covets it; he sees an opportunity for money and makes a grab for it. Every temptation ensnares him. He leaves himself open to sin, like a city whose walls are breached. He leaves himself defenseless against his mortal enemies (sin, flesh, Satan) that surge through the breach to destroy him. Sin causes a breach, and the way is open for more sin to come in, resulting in yet more gaps in the wall. It is a vicious spiral that culminates in disaster.

Why is self-control so vital to the spiritual life? In the proverb just quoted, we see that the one who has self-control is like a city whose walls are intact. His mortal enemies are kept at bay and unable to harm him. From this secure base he goes forth to gain victory for the Lord.

Self-control in the new person in Christ is not the same as what we in our non-Christian days understood it to mean.

As new people in Christ, we have entered into a life that is Christ-centered, not self-centered. Hence “self-control” is actually “Spirit-control,” that is, living under God’s lordship. It doesn’t mean that we become robots, but that through God’s indwelling Spirit we have the power to control ourselves (self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, Gal.5:23, cf.v.22). Jesus wants his disciples to be triumphant people and not mere robots.

### **Shall we not stand in the gap?**

Where is the one who will stand in the gap and build the walls? Is the church on earth still the glory of God? Jeremiah lamented over a ruined Jerusalem, with its walls crumbled and its glory departed. He wept over the city. *He tried to stand in the breach, but they did not let him!* God’s anger was so kindled against Israel that He said to Jeremiah, “Do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them; for I will not listen when they call to Me because of their disaster” (Jer.11:14). It was too late. God’s judgment had come upon His people. If we don’t repent before God, the time will come when it will be too late to avert His judgment.

Jeremiah tried to stand in the breach but got pulled away by the scruff of the neck! He was treated roughly and thrown into a pit. Yet when Yahweh’s word spoken through him came to pass, Jeremiah never said to the people of Israel, “I told you so! You’ve got what you deserve!” On the contrary

he is called the weeping prophet. When his warnings to Israel came to pass, and she was cut off as he had warned, Jeremiah wept for her. Lamentations is a record of his grief.

Let us pray that the day will not come when we will weep because God has cut off the Gentile (non-Jewish) church. He had already given clear warning through the apostle Paul that if we don't stand in faith but become arrogant (Rom.11:20), and don't continue in His kindness, then what had happened to Israel will happen to us (v.22).

May God grant us grace, compassion, wisdom, and strength to stand in the gap so that He may hold back His righteous judgment. May the church be spiritually rebuilt and her walls reestablished as the walls of salvation. May she again bring glory to God in these last days so that multitudes on earth may find salvation within her walls.





## Chapter 12



# RENEWAL: FULFILLING OUR CALLING IN CHRIST

## **Christ in our image, or we in his?**

**T**he goal of renewal is perfection, which is to be like Christ. This is the direction in life for every true disciple of Jesus. In this chapter we consider some of the weighty matters discussed in the preceding chapter, looking at them from other angles, with the hope of gaining further insights of importance.

What does “being like Christ” mean in practice? Does it mean that we’re to be “gentle, meek and mild”? But Jesus was not always “meek and mild” as we understand that phrase. There is the danger of fashioning Christ in our own image or according to our ideals, instead of letting God fashion us in Christ’s image. We must never define holiness merely in terms of human virtues. God’s character is not man’s character, nor are His virtues mere human virtues.

Was Jesus “meek and mild” when he drove the merchants out of the temple, and overturned the tables of the money-changers (Jn.2:14-17; Mk.11:15-17; Mt.21:12-13)? His actions disturb us because they don’t conform to our human notions of virtue. The Lord’s holiness, here expressed in his fashioning a whip and overturning tables, doesn’t conform to our concept of holiness or saintliness. Therefore when we speak of becoming like Jesus, we must keep in mind the Jesus of the Scriptures, not the Jesus of our imagination.

To be like Christ is not only to imitate his character, but it involves two aspects: to be transformed into Christ’s image by the Spirit of God, and to fulfill the mission that he fulfilled. This is the essence of discipleship. Jesus walks in front, and we follow “in his steps” (1Peter 2:21)—something that few Christians are doing today.<sup>28</sup>

## **What is our calling in Christ?**

In the last chapter we studied the vital statement: “He who believes in me, the works that I do shall he do also” (John 14:12). We saw that this statement does not apply principally, much less solely, to miracles. Here “works” refers to the whole mission that God had entrusted to Jesus. The

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<sup>28</sup> A thousand years ago, Simon the New Theologian (949-1022) wrote, “Is not Christ’s name spoken everywhere—in cities, in villages, in monasteries, on the mountains? Search, if you will, and examine carefully whether men keep his commandments. Truly, among thousands and tens of thousands you will find scarcely one who is Christian in word and deed.” (*Catechetical Discourses* 22:8)

words, “He who believes in me,” allow for no exception. Every true believer, every true Christian in the Biblical sense, will do the works that Christ did for the salvation of mankind, except for being an atonement for sin.

Many Christians are puzzled by Paul’s statement: “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil.1:29). Peter says the same: “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps” (1Pet.2:21).

We are called to suffer not because God delights in making us suffer, but because suffering will come when we participate in Christ’s mission of bringing salvation to the world. We cannot, of course, die for the sins of the world. Only Jesus the sinless one can do that. Yet every Christian is called to suffer in order to bring Christ’s saving work to everyone in the world.

Even if a number of believers are willing to participate in Christ’s sufferings for the salvation of mankind, can this saving mission be accomplished by them alone? Is it in God’s plan that this mission be accomplished by a small band of the faithful, or is it to be accomplished by His church as a whole? Does Scripture say that only a few are called to suffer for his sake, and not the whole community of the church?

If indeed the whole church has been called to bring the gospel to the world, then this work must start with the spiritual rebuilding of the church, to repair her breached and

fallen walls. We need to pray that God will find the person or persons to accomplish this task.

## **The spiritual state of the church and that of Israel**

In the last chapter we discussed Ezekiel 22:30. Let us revisit verses 29 to 31 in which we find striking statements made by Yahweh God:

The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD. (NIV)

God looked through the land of Israel for just one man, and what did He see? He saw people practicing extortion and robbery. It doesn't necessarily mean that the Israelites were robbing each other at knife point, but that they were taking advantage of their fellow Israelites. The whole context speaks of people who disobeyed God's law and profaned His holy things (v.26). They turned their backs on God's commands, including the two foremost: loving God with all your heart, soul, and strength; and loving your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself? That was tossed out the

window. Righteousness was banished to exile; holiness had departed from Israel.

Does this lack of love and rejection of holiness describe only the Israelites of Ezekiel's day or does it also describe God's people at the present time? Is there love for one another in the church as Jesus commanded? "This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Ezekiel wasn't saying that all Israelites were guilty of unrighteous and rapacious conduct. But it was rampant enough to call for stern condemnation. Is unrighteousness not also common among Christians today? In the church we see party spirit, lying, arrogance, immorality, slandering, need we go on? How are we any better than the Israelites? Will God tolerate this situation in His church?

And isn't a higher standard expected of the church than of Israel? Jesus made this clear at the start of his teaching ministry, in the Sermon of the Mount. In Matthew 5:2-48, the words, "You have heard that the ancients were told ... but I say to you," are repeated several times, in each case changing the emphasis from an external legal stipulation to a new inner attitude, from the letter to the Spirit (2Cor.3:6).<sup>29</sup> We are living under the terms of a new and

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<sup>29</sup> When this is perceived, it will be realized that Jesus' teaching concerning divorce (v.32) is not correctly understood when it is taken as being just another external legal stipulation or command. Jesus did not come to add a new item to the Law or even to legislate us back to a state of affairs like that in the Garden of Eden (when divorce, of course, would

better covenant (Heb.7:22; 12:24), established in the blood of Jesus, and have been given the Holy Spirit. And we must not forget that “from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Lk.12:48). In view of these facts, are we congratulating ourselves by supposing that the situation of the church with its breached walls is not as bad as that described by Ezekiel?

### **Sin breaches the walls**

In Ezekiel 22, God first denounces the extortion and robbery practiced by His people, and then sadly announces that He has found no one to stand in the breach. What is the connection between the two? What is the connection between extortion and robbery in the first statement, and the breach in the second? Isaiah 30:13 links them together: “*This iniquity will be to you like a breach in a high wall.*” Iniquity is like the breach in the wall that leaves the people without defense. To “stand in the gap” means to repair the breaches caused by sin, ensuring that the city will survive the enemy’s attacks.

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not have been contemplated), but to usher in the New Covenant in his blood and a new way of life in him. When our minds are renewed in Jesus, we will look at everything (including the problem of divorce) from his perspective, and will deal with all things with Jesus’ heart and wisdom under the guidance of God’s Spirit. A bare prohibition doesn’t change the heart and won’t solve any problem at the fundamental level. That is not Jesus’ way of dealing with man’s problems.

Ezekiel 22:30 reveals God's heart and feelings. He found no one to stand in the breach, no one who was concerned enough for the welfare of God's people that they should not be destroyed. Even when there was someone willing to stand in the gap such as the prophet Jeremiah, the people would not let him. Finally God instructed Jeremiah not to stand in the gap, for the people were beyond rescue. God was now obliged to pour out His wrath upon Israel (v.31)—God's judgment against His own people, not against unbelievers.

God's word was fulfilled in 587 B.C. when the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the Holy City, leveling it to the ground and burning down the temple. Before this, the Israelites believed that the Holy City was impregnable, and that no matter how they lived, they would be safe within its walls. They thought that God would never allow it to be destroyed because it is God's city; it is where His temple is and where He dwells. They concluded that He must and will protect it under any circumstance. It is eternally secure! Even sinners can rest secure within the city of God.

There was no lack of prophets who were assuring the people that all would be well. These false prophets proclaimed a soothing and sleep-inducing message of "Peace, Peace" (Jer.6:14; 8:11; Ezek.13:10); they were the majority by far and hence were accepted by the people. But the people rejected the true prophets, few in number, who warned of the city's impending destruction.

But this handful of rejected prophets proved to be right. The city was utterly destroyed. Those who weren't killed within its walls were dragged off in chains into exile captivity.

Micah had already warned Israel: "Zion will be ploughed as a field. Jerusalem, the Holy City, will become a heap of ruins" (Micah 3:12). And how did the people of God react to this? They shouted, "Treason! How dare you say that? God dwells in the Holy City!" We are inclined to think, as did the Israelites, that God destroys only unbelievers but never believers, not even if they sin. This tragic error is the basis for the "assurance" of many Christians, and for much preaching on assurance. Paul says:

For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying "Peace and safety!" (the common theme of false prophets in the days preceding Israel's demise) then destruction will come upon them suddenly ... and they shall not escape. (1Thessalonians 5:2,3)

## **Five principles on how God relates to His people**

Let us consider five important principles that will help us better understand God's love and holiness, two aspects of God's character. This will help us see how He relates to His people, and bring into sharper focus the spiritual significance of a breached wall and the ensuing destruction.



**First principle: God is Savior but also “Man of war”**

The first principle is this: The Old Testament portrays Yahweh God as Savior, but also as a “man of war” who vanquishes the forces of evil to become the Savior of His people. We see this in the Song of Moses:

Yahweh is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation; He is my God, and I will praise Him; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him. Yahweh is a man of war; Yahweh is His name. (Exodus 15:2-3)

The Old Testament portrays God as a man of war, as seen again and again in Isaiah, in which God is called a “man of war” (42:13) or its equivalent (e.g., 66:15-16).

A “man of war” is a warrior, a soldier, a military man, a man who does battle. “Man of war” refers to the soldier’s activity, not his rank. A man of war may be a king or a foot soldier, a general or a private, to use modern terminology. King David was called a “man of war” because he was constantly engaged in war and was skilled in battle (1Sam.16:18).

As a man of war, Yahweh God is mighty in battle against evil and unrighteousness: “Yahweh, strong and mighty; Yahweh, mighty in battle” (Psalm 24:8). Many Old Testament verses speak of God fighting for His people.<sup>30</sup>

The picture of God as a man of war who fights for His people is found also in the New Testament. Paul says, “If

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<sup>30</sup> Ex.14:14,25; Dt.1:30; 3:22; Josh.10:14,42; 23:3,10; 2Chr.20:7, 29, to name a few.

God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom.8:31) If God fights for us, who can defeat us? Anyone who fights against God’s people is fighting God Himself.

Revelation 19:11-16 gives a remarkable description of how God will vanquish the forces of sin and darkness which are gathered on earth to fight against Him and His people:

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and he who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness he judges and wages war. And his eyes are a flame of fire, and upon his head are many diadems; and he has a name written upon him which no one knows except himself. And he is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following him on white horses. And from his mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it he may smite the nations; and he will rule them with a rod of iron; and he treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

To be like Christ is not just to imitate his meekness and humility, but just as importantly to follow him in battle for holiness, righteousness and the truth. It is a battle for liberating mankind from the bondage to sin and from the forces of evil that keep men in that bondage.

## **Second principle: God’s people are a holy city in which God dwells**

The second principle is this: When God saves His people, He makes them a holy city, a people of righteousness. That Holy City is Zion (Isa.52:1; Heb.12:22,23). It is holy because it is where He has chosen to dwell. Psalm 135:21 says, “Blessed be Yahweh from Zion, He who dwells in Jerusalem!”

Similarly, God’s people form God’s dwelling place. Paul says to the Corinthians, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1Cor.3:16; cf. 6:19)

God’s Holy City is His special possession. In Psalm 48 it is called the “city of our God” (v.1) and the “city of the Lord of hosts” (v.8). Jesus calls Jerusalem “the city of the great King” (Mt.5:35). God’s people are a city that, like Mount Zion, is set on a hill that cannot be hidden, from where it radiates God’s light into the world (v.14).

Let us be clear about our mission in the world. God didn’t save us just for the sake of our salvation, but that we may be a light to those living in darkness. We cannot shirk our responsibility, and tell people, “Don’t look at us; look at Jesus. We are just a bunch of failures in the church.” That kind of attitude is a rejection of God’s will for us, for we are called to be a “city set on a hill” for everyone to see. But in reality, what do people see when they look at the church? God’s glory? Or breached walls that are crumbling because of disobedience?

Yahweh's salvation is a wall of peace, security, and salvation:

Violence will not be heard again in your land, nor devastation or destruction within your borders; But you will call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. (Isaiah 60:18; cf. 26:1)

What a beautiful picture! People will go in and out the gates with joy and praise because the walls are Salvation, proclaiming that Yahweh has saved them. But if the walls symbolize salvation, why are they crumbling? What are the breaches in the walls of salvation?

### **(1) Breached walls**

As you approach an ancient city, what is the first thing that strikes your eyes? Those who have visited the old city of Jerusalem would know that it is the walls! The walls are the most visible part of ancient cities, and can be seen from afar.

When people look at the spiritual Jerusalem, the church, what will be visible at first glance? The walls of salvation! Those who come near will see people who have been delivered from sin and transformed by grace. But is that what people see when they look at the church today? Do they see God's glorious salvation? Probably not. The reputation of churches is so poor that if you invite someone to become a Christian, he might say, "Well, just take a look at the churches!" Then we come up with the standard answer: "Don't look at the church, look at Christ." But why

shouldn't they look at the church, the light of the world? How else will people see God's saving power? How will they see Christ unless they see Christ-like people?

Is God's power evident in those who profess to believe in Jesus in some vague sense? Or in holy people who have been truly freed from sin? Where is God's power seen if not in transformed lives? What is the point of preaching about Jesus if people look at me and see only greed and selfishness? Why talk about God's salvation if my conduct shows me to be no different from unbelievers?

As you approach an ancient city, you will see its walls from afar. So God has purposed that the world will see the walls of salvation:

Yahweh has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:10)

And how will the earth see God's salvation? Verse 7 says:

How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

"He has redeemed Jerusalem" (v.9). People will see God's salvation in Zion, His redemption in Jerusalem. Yahweh bares His holy arm to bring about Jerusalem's redemption. When God redeems His people, the world will see His mighty salvation. They will look at the church and say, "Here is God's salvation!"

But is that what we see today? Do people look at the church and say, “We see God’s salvation with our eyes!” Or do they see spiritually mediocre people whose lives discredit God?

People who attend church regularly are considered “good” Christians. Those who take up church activities are considered “outstanding” Christians. But is this all that Jesus died for? Many churches talk about regeneration or being born again, but what about renewal? The new person is created in Christ Jesus in “righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Ephesians 4:23-24).

God looks around, but will He find anyone to stand in the breach and rebuild the walls? If anyone preaches holiness today, he will be opposed by Christians who say, “You’re preaching salvation by works!” I know this from personal experience, as have many others including that faithful servant of God, John Wesley. Some churches today throw out those who preach holiness. Anyone who is willing to stand in the breach to repair it may experience the same kind of abuse that was meted out to the prophet Jeremiah.

## **(2) How are justification and salvation related?**

There are those who talk about “justification by faith” in a way that makes holiness unnecessary. We thank God from our hearts for justifying us sinners through the death of His Son. We praise Him for the greatness of His grace in justifying us. But there are those who talk about justification as if that is all that Jesus accomplished for us, as if there is no

other subject in the Bible. Some dwell on “justification by faith” and think they have covered the sum of theology.

Justification is certainly a vital stage in the process of salvation. But it is just one stage, and it corresponds to “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5). The other important stages—growth or renewal, maturity or perfection—must not be neglected if we hope to arrive at salvation in its final consummation, when “we shall be saved”.

Romans 5:9 says we are “justified by his blood”. The next verse says, “how much more, having been reconciled (to God), shall we be saved through his life!”

One of the dangerous errors that contributes to the disregard for holiness in the church is the notion that once we are justified or reconciled, we proceed automatically to final salvation. It becomes a matter of waiting to get to heaven. Justification and final salvation are thought to be one and the same. But there is no basis in Scripture for this persistent error that has misled multitudes.

We accept this “automatic” connection between justification and final salvation only by ignoring the verses which show that the final salvation is conditional on continuing in the faith. The statements are clear and require no explanation:

Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine”. (John 8:31)

Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. (Romans 11:22)

He has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel. (Colossians 1:22,23)

The one that endures to the end, he shall be saved. (Mt.24:13; Mk. 13:13)

We ignore these conditional statements at our cost. It would be foolish to think that as believers we can ignore righteousness or sin with impunity. Isaiah says to Yahweh on behalf of the nation: “You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continue to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?” (Isaiah 64:5, NIV)

Left to ourselves, we are unable to persevere to the end. But the whole point is that *we are not left to ourselves*. The Holy Spirit indwells all who have been redeemed by Jesus' blood, and God will certainly keep us from falling if we abide in Him, drawing from His bountiful grace.

The Bible does not teach a salvation by holiness, but a holiness that comes after we have been saved from the guilt and power of sin. Holiness is the result of salvation, not its cause. When we, like Paul, stress the necessity of holiness in



our lives and in the church, this does not mean salvation by works. Rather, we are talking about the purpose of Christ's death: "He has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Col.1:22).

**Third principle: If the holy city is unholy, God will judge it**

If we who are God's people remain unholy, what will God do to us? The standard answer is, "Nothing! God won't do anything to us because Jesus died for us. Of course you shouldn't continue in sin, but even if you do, God won't do anything to you. Christians won't come under judgment, for Jesus paid it all!" This is a license to sin with impunity, covered by the words, "Jesus died for us."

Some years ago, a group of Christian leaders at a large conference insisted that once a person is saved, he can under no circumstance ever be lost. I asked them, "What exactly do you mean by that? Do you mean that if a Christian commits adultery, murder, or another major sin, *and does not repent of it*, he or she will be saved all the same?" The shocking answer from one of them, presumably speaking for the group, was a firm "Yes"! The others remained silent and expressed no disagreement, so it must be assumed that they were of the same opinion. I refuse to be party to this falsehood.

We come to our third principle: *When God's people become unholy—when the holy city becomes unholy—God will fight against His own city and destroy it.* The Old Testament

bears abundant witness to this. If we think that God's dealings with Israel do not apply to us because we live in the New Testament age, then we have evidently not heard what the apostle Paul said: "*These things* [that happened to the Israelites in the wilderness] ... *were written for our instruction upon whom the end of the ages has come*" (1Cor.10:11).

Do we still think that God has lowered His standards for us? Doesn't Luke 12:48 say that to whom much is given, much will be required? Do we think that God will close His eyes to our sins because we are "hidden" behind Christ's righteousness?

Where is the one who stands in the gap today? Many in the church see no gaps today in the walls of the "city set on a hill" (Mt. 5:14)—namely, God's holy city, the church—so they think that we are secure within its walls. Where is the need for someone to stand in a gap that does not exist? And didn't Jesus say, "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Mt.16:18)?

Sin and death (Hades, the abode of the dead) will not overwhelm the church, for the church contains a lot of "wheat" (true believers) despite the "weeds" (cf. the Parable of the Weeds, or Tares, Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43). God's Kingdom, the present manifestation of which is the church, contains both wheat and weeds. The weeds will be "pulled up and burned in the fire" (v.40); "they will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous [wheat] will shine like the sun

in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear” (vv.42,43).

That the weeds thrive in the Kingdom is evident from the fact that it is not until “the end of the age” that they are pulled up and burned (vv.39,40). “The Son of Man will send out his angels and gather out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (v.41).

It is pointless to speak of a visible and an invisible church because weed is as visible as wheat. Moreover, the weed that grows among wheat is hard to distinguish from wheat,<sup>31</sup> especially for city dwellers who know little about wheat or agriculture.

Hastings’ *Dictionary of the Bible*, in a long article on tares or weed, provides us with a note on what the early people believed about them:

The Talmud asserts that tares are degenerate wheat; and Tristram (with Thomson and others) says that the peasants of the Holy Land believe that the darnel and the wheat spring from the same seed ... and that in very wet seasons the wheat itself turns to tares.

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<sup>31</sup> Under “Tares”: “(Mt.13:25ff.) the bearded darnel, **a weed much resembling wheat in its earlier stages**, and growing mostly in grain fields. Its kernel is black, bitter, and smaller than wheat. It is poisonous, producing dizziness, sleepiness, nausea, diarrhea, convulsions, gangrene, and sometimes death.” *Hastings’ Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (boldface added).

While such a view is not supported by scientific knowledge, the point is that those who first heard Jesus' parable thought of tares as "degenerate wheat". Hence they perceived a dimension of the parable that we might not see, that of the danger of spiritual degeneration. The case of Demas is a striking example; he degenerated from being a coworker of Paul to finally falling in love with the world and deserting Paul (Phm.1:24, which mentions Demas before Luke; Col.4:14; 2Tim.4:10).

We would be wise to take these lessons to heart, for the Scriptures were written for our instruction (1Cor.10:11). Many of the lessons have to do with the fall and destruction of Israel as a nation, and her being sent into exile. Have we learned the lessons of these tragic events? "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

The walls of Jerusalem were being breached because of Israel's persistent disobedience to God. Micah prophesied that the Holy City will become a heap of ruins, and that Zion—the city where the temple stands—will be ploughed as a field because of Israel's sin and rapacity. Yet the people rejected Micah's warnings of disaster, believing that God will never allow it: "Is not Yahweh in our midst? Calamity will not come upon us" (Micah 3:11).

Will we fall into the same deception? God never compromises with sin, especially the sin committed by those whom He has redeemed with the blood of His Son Jesus Christ.

## (1) God will judge His people

A familiar Old Testament theme is that God will judge the unrighteous *among His own people*. If we fail to see this, we must be reading the Bible with our eyes closed.

“Yahweh, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chasten me in Your wrath” (Psalm 6:1) When God’s people sin, the first thing that God will do is to chasten or discipline them. Make no mistake about it. If you claim to know God as the living God who has redeemed you, yet ignore the truth that God will chasten you if you sin, then wait and see what God will do to you the next time you sin and do not repent.

If He does nothing to you, either He is not real or you don’t belong to Him. These are the only two possibilities. Those of us who follow God know from experience how real He is. So if He does nothing to you, then you have reason to worry, for it means that He does not recognize you as one of His own. But if He chastises you, you would have reason to be glad “because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son” (Heb.12:6).

If you as a child of God commit sin, His chastening hand will come upon you without fail. He will deal with you with measured severity. God disciplines only those who are His children. We don’t chasten someone else’s child. If the boy next door misbehaves, I won’t go over to punish him. That is his parents’ responsibility, not mine. But if my child sins, I will deal with him or her because I love my child and do not want him or her to fall into evil ways. The following passage speaks repeatedly of discipline:

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s **discipline**, and do not lose heart when he **rebukes** you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he **punishes** everyone he accepts as a son.” Endure hardship as **discipline**; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not **disciplined** by his father? If you are not **disciplined** (and everyone undergoes **discipline**), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. (Hebrews 12:5-8, NIV)

Knowing that he is a child of God, David repents under God’s heavy chastising hand:

Be gracious to me, Yahweh, for I am pining away; Heal me [i.e., “save me,” v.4], Yahweh, for my bones are dismayed. And my soul is greatly dismayed; but You, Yahweh—how long? Return, Yahweh, rescue my soul; Save me because of Your lovingkindness. (Psalm 6:2-4)

David was languishing, so he pleaded for an end to the severe discipline that Yahweh was administering to him. David had committed a serious sin, and God was obliged to deal with him sternly.

God disciplines us in order “that we may share His holiness” and yield “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb.12:10-11). God will discipline us if we are His children. That is how we know that God is real, and that we are His children. Through the discipline we learn to refrain from sinning.

God will certainly punish those Christians who reject His chastening, being stiff-necked like the recalcitrant Israelites

who had sinews of iron and a forehead of bronze (Isaiah 48:4). If they persist in their sins, this is what Psalms 7:12-13 says will happen: “If a man does not repent, God will sharpen His sword; He has bent His bow and made it ready. He has also prepared for Himself deadly weapons.”

God will sharpen His sword! And what do you do with a sword? Tap someone gently on the shoulder? A sword is for destruction. God will sharpen His sword with a whetstone. He will bend His bow and shoot the fiery arrows of judgment. If a man does not repent, he will be destroyed utterly.

It is the same in the New Testament: “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). This is not an Old Testament quotation but something written to New Testament Christians who, in blind recklessness, persist in sin and ungodliness, treating “as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and insulted the Spirit of grace” (v.29). Quoting two Old Testament verses, Hebrews goes on to say, “For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people’” (v.30, quoting Dt.32:35,36).

## **(2) False prophets preach “peace and security”**

Because many Christians see holiness as non-essential, ignoring it and even rejecting it, we now have the dreadful situation in which the walls of the “city on a hill” are crumbling, and God’s prophets—where are they?—have

nothing to say. And what do people preach today? Peace and security! Brothers and sisters, the characteristic message of the false prophets in the Old Testament was *peace and security!* That is the typical, identifying message of a false prophet. In Ezekiel 13:9-11 God says:

My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions and utter lying divinations ... because they have misled My people by saying, "Peace!" when there is no peace. And when anyone builds a wall, behold, they plaster it over with whitewash; so tell those who plaster it over with whitewash that it will fall.

Verse 16 says that Yahweh God is opposed to the prophets "who prophesy to Jerusalem, and who see visions of peace for her when there is no peace". The identifying mark of false prophets is their never-ending talk of peace and security. This is also seen in the New Testament:

The day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly ... and they shall not escape. (1Thessalonians 5:2,3)

Jeremiah 6:13-14 says:

For from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for gain, and from the prophet even to the priest everyone deals falsely. And they have healed the brokenness of My people superficially, Saying, "Peace, peace," but there is no peace.



Again the typical message of false prophets: “Peace, peace! Everything’s fine and secure. Don’t worry. You’re saved, so stand in the assurance of your safety.”

An identical charge, almost word for word, against these prophets and priests is repeated two chapters later:

Everyone is greedy for gain; from the prophet even to the priest everyone practices deceit. And they heal the brokenness of the daughter of My people superficially, Saying, “Peace, peace,” but there is no peace. (Jeremiah 8:10-11)

These prophets and priests were motivated by a desire for “gain,” the good life that comes from a good income. And how would that be possible if you don’t tell the people the things they want to hear, even if these are false? A preacher who preaches against the sins of the people will find himself out of a job, and will face fierce opposition.

“Peace and security” is the kind of “good news” that is always welcomed. Even the false prophet or preacher desires it for himself, not just for his hearers! He can preach it with considerable conviction, especially if he can find a shred of what appears to be supporting evidence for it.

Is God’s Temple not located in Jerusalem? Is the temple not God’s dwelling place? The Israelites even raise the question, “Is not Yahweh in our midst?” But Micah says that these are the words which false prophets use to justify themselves. Micah 3:11 describes the situation:

Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean

upon Yahweh and say, “Is not Yahweh among us? No disaster will come upon us.”

These religious leaders, priests and prophets, claim that God is in their midst even though there is not a shred of evidence for that confidence; this is a brazen claim motivated by greed and unrighteousness. But undeterred by reality, they still dare to “lean upon Yahweh” and claim to have *faith* in Him! And they feel secure in their “faith”!

These leaders and prophets claim, on the basis of their supposedly valid reasoning, that their message of peace and security is justified. The people and quite certainly the prophets themselves are willingly deceived. How deadly, yet how convincing, are the pitfalls of deception and self-deception when we don’t walk on the path of righteousness that God has marked out for us!

This passage in Micah reveals a startling truth that we ignore to our eternal detriment and regret: it is possible to live in deep sin, yet have a faith that assures us that “no disaster will come upon us”. This “faith” causes the sinner to feel eternally secure because it assures him that no disaster will touch him. He thinks he can continue to sin without fear or concern, for their “consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Timothy 4:2).

This kind of faith removes from a person the fear of God and the concern for truth and righteousness, and keeps him comfortably ensconced in a life of sin. It is the acme of self-deception. If anyone speaks of justification, salvation, or assurance by faith, they do well to consider what kind of

faith they are talking about, lest they lead themselves and others into destruction.

This destruction is graphically described by Micah in the next verse: “Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets” (3:12). The Holy City will be reduced to a scene of destruction and desolation, with its people swept up in the disaster.

What does God say about the false prophets and leaders who have brought all this about? “Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time of their punishment they shall be brought down, declares Yahweh.” (Jeremiah 8:12)

In the end, what happened to Jerusalem? Sure enough, the walls finally fell, the assurances of the false prophets notwithstanding. The Babylonian army “broke down the walls around Jerusalem” (2Kings 25:10) in Nebuchadnezzar’s terrifying destruction of “indestructible” Jerusalem.

Yet today we hear the same message being preached. “Peace and assurance! Everything’s fine. Build a thin whitewashed wall over the gaps to hide the cracks in the wall!” (cf. Ezekiel 13:10-15)

### **(3) God fights against His people if they persist in sin**

God is a warrior who stands for truth and holiness. If His people live in sin, He will become their enemy and fight against them. This is a fundamental principle of Scripture.

If you are living in sin after God has redeemed you, He will fight against you.

The Scriptural evidence for this is abundant. Yahweh says to Israel, “I Myself will fight against you” (Jer.21:5). God will personally fight His rebellious people.

Isaiah 63:10 says of Israel, “They rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit” (cf. Eph.4:30). What then did Yahweh do? The same verse gives the answer: “He therefore turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.” Psalm 106:40-41 says, “The anger of Yahweh was kindled against His people, and He abhorred His heritage; He gave them into the hand of the nations.” Words such as “anger” and “abhorred” are forceful. Yahweh was disgusted with His own people, His own heritage. Psalms 78:59 says, “He was full of wrath, and He utterly rejected Israel.”

Returning to the picture of a breach in the wall, God’s judgment against His people is expressed in the words, “Yahweh had made a breach in the tribes of Israel” (Judges 21:15), a reference to the near-extirmination of the tribe of Benjamin.

Need we go on? Is it possible to read the Bible and not see how God deals with His own people when they sin? The walls of Jerusalem, the Holy City, were breached and demolished, and Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C. This imagery is seen many times in the Psalms: “O God, You have rejected us, broken our defenses” (60:1). “Why then have You broken down its walls?” (80:12) “You have breached all Israel’s walls; You have laid his strongholds in ruins.” (89:40)

Do we have ears to hear? If we are living in sin, God will breach the walls that once gave us security. Lamentations 2:5 says:

The Lord has become like an enemy. He has swallowed up Israel; He has swallowed up all its palaces; He has destroyed its strongholds.

Israel's protective ramparts were ruined and their gates destroyed. The whole of Lamentations 2 attests to this, for example, verses 8-9:

Yahweh determined to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion ... He has not restrained His hand from destroying; and He has caused rampart and wall to lament ... Her gates have sunk into the ground.

I previously said that the time for the church is getting short. Our days are numbered because “the times of the Gentiles” (Lk.21:24) will soon come to an end. Romans 11 says that when Israel sinned, God cut off Israel. Likewise, if we the Gentile church live in disobedience, God won't spare us, but will also cut us off (Rom.11:21-22). Yet many preachers in the church today insist on proclaiming, “Peace and security! Don't you worry, for the walls of the Holy City will never fall. God will never fight against us.” Do we hold back tears when we hear the chorus of “prophets” and preachers confidently proclaiming this kind of assurance? They are like the false prophets of old who proclaimed, “Jerusalem will stand forever; no one can touch God's city.

Didn't God turn back the Assyrians at the walls of Jerusalem?"

### **Fourth principle: True assurance for the holy**

The fourth principle is this: We cannot have true assurance unless we are living in holiness and righteousness. If we claim to be saved, yet are living in sin with a false sense of the assurance of salvation, then we are fools in the Bible's sense of "fool" (one who is out of touch with God and spiritual reality). The Word of God offers no assurance that is removed from holiness and righteousness.

Ezekiel chapter 13 is a lamentable record of "foolish prophets" who persuaded a people disobedient to God to feel secure in their false assurance. Yahweh God said to Ezekiel:

Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel ... Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit ... You [Israel] have not gone up into the breaches, nor did you build the wall around the house of Israel to stand in the battle on the day of Yahweh. They [the false prophets] see falsehood and lying divination who are saying, "Yahweh declares," when Yahweh has not sent them ... My hand will be against the prophets who see false visions ... They have misled My people by saying, "Peace!" when there is no peace ... So I shall tear down the wall which you plastered over with whitewash ... and when it falls, you will be consumed in its midst. And you will know that I am Yahweh. Thus I shall spend my wrath. (verses 2,3,5,6,9,10,14,15 of Ezekiel 13)

The people ignored Ezekiel's warnings that grated on their ears, making them squirm in discomfort. His voice was drowned out by the false prophets who were shouting in unison, "Peace and security!" Meanwhile the walls of Jerusalem were crumbling.

God certainly gives assurance to those who walk in truth and righteousness. But if we are living in sin, any assurance we think we have is not from God. We have true assurance only when the Spirit of God witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16). That is the basis of true assurance in Scripture. If you are living in sin, would the Spirit witness with your spirit? How can the Spirit witness in us when we are out of touch with God, and when sin *separates* us from God (Isaiah 59:2).

### **Fifth principle: God longs for someone to repair the breach**

God does not delight in judging His people. In the wilderness He took no pleasure in allowing the Israelites, whom He had redeemed out of Egypt, to perish. Neither does God delight in bringing judgment upon His people today. Would God have searched for someone to stand in the gap if He does not, in His love and mercy, desire to spare the people from judgment?

Meditate once more on these poignant words in Ezekiel 22:30: "I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before Me for the land,

that I should not destroy it; but I found none.” Feel the pain in God’s heart. He was about to destroy Jerusalem and His people. Their stubborn recalcitrance left Him with no other choice. He held back, earnestly looking for someone to stand in the gap, to repair the breaches, to rebuild the walls, so that He may rescue them from the catastrophe that could not be delayed much longer.

But God was “astonished” that there was no one to intercede or to build up the walls. Isaiah 59:16 says, “He saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede.” Yes, God was astonished! Isaiah continues:

And He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head ... According to their deeds, so He will repay, wrath to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies. (vv.17-18)

In this striking situation, God puts on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation. What are these armor items for? This passage indicates that they are used for achieving righteousness and salvation. We are reminded of the armor of God in Ephesians 6 which we, too, are called to put on.

An important aspect of being like Christ is to fulfill the mission that he fulfilled; so we too must put on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation. The Lord has salvation as his mission, to save people from their sins. We too are to wage war against sin, and bring people to righteousness. We don’t just lead people to a mere “belief”



in Jesus, but to a saving faith that results in their being transferred from darkness to light, from unrighteousness to righteousness, so that they may become new persons in Christ.

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:3, ESV).

The wise man is the one who wins souls and turns people to righteousness, not just to church membership or a vague belief in Jesus. Anyone who has not turned away from darkness to light is not saved despite having a “belief” in Jesus.

Salvation starts with regeneration, which results in transformation and newness of life. Are we peddling a cheap salvation and a diluted gospel? The Biblical gospel is the one which brings us into a whole new life in Christ and makes of us new persons by God’s saving power.

Brothers and sisters, are we willing to stand in the gap? If so, Isaiah 58:12 has a vision for us: “Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach.” Will God find someone in the church who will stand in the gap today? Or will He again be “astonished” that no one cares to intercede, or to stand in the breach and rebuild the walls of salvation?

In this verse, “repairer of the breach” is mentioned in the context of “righteousness” and “wickedness” (vv.2,4,6,8,9).

A repairer of the breach is someone who lives in righteousness and leads people to righteousness.

That is exactly what Jesus did. Jesus was preeminently the One who stood in the gap. At the cross he stretched out his hands to bridge the gap, to repair the breach, and to reconcile us to God. He laid down his life for us; and we, responding to his call and example, take up our cross and follow him. *He is the supreme Repairer of the Breach.* So in this generation, through God's indwelling Spirit, we follow in Christ's steps to be like him.

Will you answer the call to walk in his footsteps? We are called "not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29)—for the sake of him "who loved us and gave himself for us" (Eph.5:2; cf. Gal.2:20). 1John 3:16 says, "He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

Let us catch a vision of rebuilding the walls of salvation, so that the church may be restored to glory, and the ends of the earth may see God's salvation.

## Chapter 13



# PERFECTION: BE MERCIFUL LIKE YOUR FATHER

### Perfection is required

The ultimate goal of regeneration and renewal is *perfection*, which is to be like Christ. It is lamentable that Christ-likeness—the final goal of the new life in Christ—is ignored in the churches today even though it is a vital concept in Scripture. Yet the Lord Jesus didn't just teach perfection as a desirable ideal for us to contemplate, he requires it: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" (Mt.5:48)

In Matthew 5, the whole section leading up to verse 48 (and linked by the word "therefore") is instructional, but it also has an *imperative* character. This is already seen from verse 21 onwards, where Jesus cites Old Testament commands, and then explains their application on the spiritual level in the present age for his disciples. The connective

“therefore” in verse 48 brings out the content and nature of the perfection he expects of us. Perfection is expected of every Christian, not just the “higher level” Christians.

How do I fulfill the requirements of perfection? If I don’t understand what perfection is, how can I know where to start? In an earlier chapter we described perfection in terms of holiness. But few Christians today understand what holiness is. We may try to define “holy” as “set apart for God,” but again few understand what this means. We might try to describe holiness in terms of total commitment, but that might not be clear to some people. It would be helpful to meditate on the whole section Matthew 5:21-48 and let the Spirit illuminate our hearts regarding the spirit (as opposed to the letter, 2Cor.3:6) of the perfection he calls us to. We now look at perfection in Matthew 5:48 from the point of view of the parallel verse given in the Gospel of Luke.

## EIGHT POINTS FOR UNDERSTANDING AND IMPLEMENTING THE LIFE-TRANSFORMING TEACHING ON MERCY IN SCRIPTURE

### **(1) Perfection as mercy: Be merciful as your Father is merciful**

The Lord Jesus provides us with a parallel definition or description of perfection: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). On the surface its meaning seems clear enough, yet it is not easy to fathom the depth of this statement. Let us search out its spiritual riches, guided by the Spirit. To get the context, we read from verse 32:

<sup>32</sup> And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, in order to receive back the same amount. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:32-36)

The last statement, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” is the one we will consider. From the fact that it stands as a parallel to the words in Matthew (“Be perfect as

your heavenly Father is perfect”), it is evident that “merciful” and “perfect” are to be taken as spiritual synonyms, the one defining or describing the other.

Perfection may be an abstract concept to us, but if Jesus tells us to be *merciful*, the whole picture becomes concrete. “Merciful” is a word that most of us understand because it finds expression in action, as in the term “acts of mercy”.

Of course it is more complex than that. When we study the Biblical meaning of mercy, we will soon see that it is something beyond human strength and ability to attain. Left to our human capacity without the benefit of regeneration and renewal, we can never attain to the kind of mercy to which Jesus calls us. That is why we are studying regeneration and renewal, without which we can never attain to mercifulness in the Biblical sense. I may give a dollar to a beggar, and that is undeniably an act of mercy. But it is beyond our human capacity to show mercy as a *consistent* quality of life, and emanating from a spiritual motive. Anyone who has ever tried to be merciful consistently will know this from personal experience.

## **(2) What is mercy?**

Let us look at the Biblical concept of mercy. I emphasize “Biblical” because we tend to define a term according to our own understanding of it and not according to the Bible’s definition. Biblical concepts must be defined according to

the Bible, not just according to Oxford Dictionary or our own understanding.

What is the Biblical concept of mercy? A basic principle of exegesis is to examine the context. In the immediate context of our passage, Jesus equates kindness and mercy: “He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil<sup>32</sup> men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (vv.35-36).

Here Jesus equates mercy and kindness, not mere human kindness but divine kindness, God’s kindness, a kindness not motivated by human feelings but by God’s self-giving love. We may be kind to those who are kind to us—a reciprocal kindness—but God is kind even to the ungrateful and the selfish. We can never do that by our human nature. I can be kind to those who are kind to me, but the Lord calls for more than that, for “even sinners do the same” (v.33).

If you are kind to a sinner, he may return you kindness. If you show him love, he may return you some love. That is entirely human. But in the long term, he won’t show you kindness *consistently* unless he gets something from you or you reciprocate his kindness. He won’t be kind to you *consistently* without being motivated by reward. A businessman may invite you to dinner even if he hardly knows you. Rest assured that he invited you to a nice restaurant to get something from you. The world operates on the principle

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<sup>32</sup> *Ponēros*, πονηρός, here refers to an “evil-intentioned person, evildoer,” cf. BAG, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 2.a.

that nothing is free in the world, with no “free lunches”. Every act of kindness is an investment motivated by reward.

But Jesus makes an astonishing statement: “Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return” (v.35). Expect nothing in return? Yes, it takes great faith to believe that your reward will come from God and not from the one to whom you showed kindness.

It takes faith to expect things from God. Many Christians are acutely aware of their little faith. When we run into visa problems, financial problems, or health problems, our faith starts to wobble. We have limited confidence in God’s power. So we do things in a human way: Give only when there is a possibility of a return.

In our minds, the exchange of favors is the normal decency of social life.<sup>33</sup> If I give you something, it is only proper that you give me something in return. If you fail to return my favor, don’t expect any more favors from me. This is a universal principle of human relationships in the world.

But Jesus reverses the principles of society: Give without expecting anything in return. Give away something as if it will never come back. This way of thinking is impossible to our human nature.

Even less is it in our nature to give to “ungrateful and evil men” (v.35), even when they are in genuine need. Why should we give to the ungrateful or the wicked? We justify our refusal to give to them on the grounds that this will only

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<sup>33</sup> The Chinese would say *li shang wang lai* (courtesy calls for reciprocity).



serve to reinforce their ingratitude and wickedness. So we give ourselves a seemingly plausible argument for not giving to them. But that is not the Biblical understanding of mercy.

### **(3) Mercy as practical kindness**

Mercy is not a mere ideal but something intensely practical. The Biblical teaching on mercy points us to a new spiritual level that far exceeds our present level. I thank God that something beautiful is happening in some of our churches. I see an increasing concern among the brothers and sisters for one another. I am touched by the fact that some people have anonymously paid the camp fees for those who couldn't afford them. This is genuine concern for the brethren.

I imagine them saying to themselves, "I wish this brother or sister could go to the camp because it will benefit them spiritually, but I know that he or she can't afford the fees." So they paid the fees anonymously. I see a growing mutual concern among the brothers and sisters, and I thank God that we have moved beyond our former spiritual level. It was not long ago that we were quite lacking in this kind of care and concern. We may have heard something about brotherly love, but we found it hard to fulfill. We were too busy coping with our personal problems to think of others.

By God's grace, we have moved past the first stage. We still have a long way to go, so we must never be complacent. Let us press towards the mark of perfection even if it is still some distance away, and strive for a new level of concern (a

vital element of mercy) that is expressed even to people we may not like. This is not easy, but by God's grace, we have at least reached a basic level of concern for each other. If we haven't arrived at this basic level, how can we talk about caring for the ungrateful and the selfish?

By nature you and I cannot achieve this. It is hard enough to love a brother or sister who has a modicum of concern for us. But loving the ungrateful and the wicked seems to be something not of this world. Yet Jesus commands us to be merciful, to be perfect. The imperative voice indicates that it is more than a suggestion. If we are truly "sons of the Most High" (v.35), then we ought to be as he is, and do as he does. Jesus sets a goal before us, and we press towards it.

In striving for perfection and Christ-like mercifulness, a spiritual principle comes into play: *We will receive spiritual power*, for it is in giving that we receive: "Give and it will be given to you" (Luke 6:38). What we give may be material and temporal, but what God gives us in return is spiritual and eternal. As we press towards the mark of being merciful, we will grow in spiritual strength, and will be empowered to accomplish something for God in this world. It takes spiritual power to accomplish anything for God. Many people by their own admission have accomplished little for Him despite having university and seminary degrees.

A friend of mine, a distinguished professor in London, has a collection of degrees that will dazzle you. He has garnered the highest honors that England could bestow on

her scientists in his field of research. This professor also studied the Bible for many years. Yet one day he told me in grief that he was spiritually powerless. That is ironic and saddening because many Christians in England know and respect his name, and he has drawn many to Christian conferences.

Brothers and sisters, we need God's power if we are to accomplish anything for God's kingdom. It doesn't depend on our theological or academic qualifications. By the authority of God's word, I say without apology that those who press on towards perfection—practicing mercy as God is merciful—will experience communion with Him and will receive from Him the spiritual power to do His work in this generation.

#### **(4) Mercy is shown to the undeserving**

“He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” Here mercy is synonymous with kindness, but not kindness as we usually understand it. The Lord Jesus is talking about a kindness that is shown even to the undeserving. That is true grace and mercy. We, as recipients of God's grace, must in turn show grace and mercy to others. Jesus says, “Freely you received, freely give” (Mt.10:8).

The Lord fulfilled this level of kindness in his own life when he loved us even while we were sinners and his enemies (Rom.5:8,10). His power came into our lives and transformed us from being hostile enemies of God into saints, the

holy ones, the children of God. It is astonishing that the Bible would call us saints. Paul's letters are addressed to the saints, the very people who used to be God's enemies.

We in turn show unmerited grace to the equally undeserving. God in His mercy makes the sun rise on the good and the evil, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Mt.5:45). Here is God's universal mercy. He doesn't just shine the sun on the garden of the righteous man while the rest of the world lies in darkness. Nor does He concentrate His rain on the farm of the righteous man while the rest of the world becomes a desert. He gives rain and sunshine to all, to the righteous and the unrighteous. But over and above that, the magnificent scope of His love is revealed through the wondrous cross of Christ. Though we may be unable to fathom the cross in its full depth and magnitude, what matters is that it can be experienced in our hearts.

Mercy may be hard to fathom, yet can be deeply felt by the one to whom we show the undeserved kindness that God first showed us. The one who receives unmerited mercy will wonder why it was given him. If we could, by God's grace, consistently pass on His mercy to the undeserving, would that not result in a spiritual revolution?

I have met Christians who are unhappy with God's universal mercy. "I belong to You, Lord. Send more sunshine in my direction, less in theirs! The other guy doesn't even know You, yet his harvest is better than mine. I go to church every Sunday and put money in the offering, but the

other guy doesn't give a cent." We often feel that it's unfair that a non-Christian earns more money or drives a better car. Where is God's justice in the world? That is a real problem in the minds of some Christians. "Why does God treat the righteous and the unrighteous alike?" The Bible's answer is plain and simple: God is merciful to the very people we dislike, even God's enemies.

How different is God's character from ours! If we are to be like God, we must let Him change our notions about Him. Many worldly and self-centered attitudes have polluted the life of the church, causing us to fall far short of God's intentions for us. Rather than understanding God according to our image (the Greeks imagined their gods to be higher versions of man), we need to be transformed into His image.

### **(5) Mercy is deep concern**

In the Bible, "mercy" means sympathy, pity and compassion. It empathizes with those who mourn and suffer. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt.5:4). This is a familiar beatitude, yet how many understand it? It doesn't refer to those who mourn for themselves out of self-pity. As Christians we should have gone past the stage of mourning over our past sins which we have truly repented of, and which have been forgiven through the blood of Jesus.

“Blessed are those who mourn” goes deeper than our self-centered thinking. It refers to those who mourn for the wretchedness and pitiful estate of others. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Rom.12:15). If we cannot weep with those who weep, how can we rejoice with those who rejoice? Let us learn to weep with those who are stricken with grief. Or do we weep only for ourselves? Many Christians who go to church solely for their own comfort and welfare. “God bless my father, my mother, my children, and especially me.” Even when we read the Scriptures, we do it in a self-centered way: “God’s promises in the Bible are there to bless me.”

## **(6) Mercy is rooted in selflessness**

In chapter 1 of this book, we discussed the death of our old self. Let me define this concisely in one sentence: *Death to self means that we cease to be concerned for ourselves, and become concerned for others.* This definition may seem simplistic, but it is in accord with Scripture. If a person is dead to self, where are his concerns now? Is a dead man concerned about food and clothing, buying a house, and worldly ambitions? These things concerned us in the old way of life before we became new persons in Christ. Of course, we are now still living in this world in our fleshly bodies, so we do need food and clothing; but these are no longer our central concerns when we become new people in Christ.

We died with Christ, were buried with him, and were raised into newness of life. We now have the mind of Christ (1Cor. 2:16; Phil.2:5). It is a mind that is finished with the self and goes out to others. Freed from our own interests and preoccupations, we turn our attention to the needs of others.

Whenever I listen to the church brothers and sisters share about their visa or financial problems, it brings back memories of my earlier years of walking with God. I have gone through more visa problems than most people in a lifetime. I lived in England 17 years, and had 17 years of visa problems. My visa was up for review every year, sometimes twice a year. The approval process was complicated by the fact that I came from China which at that time, the 1950s and 1960s, had diplomatic relations with few countries, and was regarded by most countries with distrust if not hostility. I learned to leave the visa matters to God without worrying about them. I would say to Him, “Lord, if You want me to stay in England, please keep me here. But if You have some other plans for me, then put me anywhere else in the world.” I didn’t waste my time worrying about these problems.

Some of you are facing financial problems. I empathize with you because I was often penniless or near-penniless. An empty pocket was my familiar friend. If I had worried about money, my hair would have turned gray in my twenties. By God’s grace, I would simply forget about myself and get on with the work He had entrusted to me, knowing that my heavenly Father will provide for all my needs—and this He has never failed to do.

I studied at the Bible Institute with no assurance of financial support and no certainty of being able to complete my studies there. By God's grace, I completed my studies. It was the same when I went on to another Bible college. Later, I entered university with no assurance that I could even pay my first term's fees. I didn't rely on anyone to help me in my financial need, but looked only to the Lord. This situation repeated itself annually when it was time to pay the fees. But I thank God that anxiety was far from me. I simply told Him, "A degree means nothing to me. Whether You want me to have it or not, I will be grateful either way." In the end, He saw to it that I completed my studies.

We must learn to forget about ourselves and our never-ending problems. We encounter many problems in our Christian lives that exasperate us because they get in our way. We want to advance in our pursuit of the Lord, but these problems distract us, consume our time and energy, and even cause us to feel resentful. We want to move forward but these problems pull us back to the self—the very thing we want to forget. But let us be determined by God's grace to finish with the self, in order that, like Paul, our eyes may be focused on the goal before us in Christ. "*Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith*" (Heb.12:2).

Paul says, "Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude" (Phil.3:15). Here "perfect" is the same word as in the Greek text of Matthew 5:48 ("be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect"). Those who are perfect ought to have "this attitude" of fixing our eyes on the goal before us,



forgetting ourselves and our past, and pressing on. “Let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb.12:1).

Brothers and sisters, we are called to finish with the self. This high calling is not limited to “higher” or “spiritual” Christians, but applies to every Christian. Death to self should have taken place at baptism. The old life should have ended there, as the pulse of the new Christ-life begins to beat in us.

We must be freed from the self in order to be merciful or perfect, for no self-centered person could possibly be merciful. The merciful person goes out to others, especially those in need, but the self-centered person is imprisoned in his own shell. When we visit a church, we can often assess its spiritual condition in a few minutes. In many churches, people don’t greet you when you walk in. You are like an invisible ghost who walks by. After the service you get up and go, like an invisible ghost. In some churches you receive a smile and a handshake. In only a few churches will you find people who really care about you, taking the time to chat with you. Of course what we are aiming for is genuine concern, not a show of politeness.

## **(7) The merciful are not fixated on their own salvation**

Why should I be kind to the ungrateful and the evildoers? How does that benefit me? Our sole reason for being kind to them is a concern for their salvation and eternal welfare. Yet many go to church for their own salvation with no concern for the eternal welfare of others.

The genuine Christian, because he has experienced God's grace and salvation, will not be preoccupied with his own salvation, but will be concerned with the eternal well-being of others. Paul shows remarkably little concern for his own salvation; he is willing to forfeit his own salvation if that could lead to the salvation of Israel (Romans 9:3). I know of Christians who are offended by that statement. But Paul is closer to the mind of Christ than most of us are.

Paul was simply imitating Jesus. When the Lord was dying on the cross, some mocked him: "He saved others; he cannot save himself" (Mt.27:42). In fact he *could* have saved himself, but he *would* not; for if he saved himself, he could not have saved others. That is what Christ is like. To be Christ-like is to have this way of thinking. That is what the call to perfection is all about.

For better or worse, most people in the church are intellectuals, and mostly for the worse because we have trained ourselves to think for our own interests. We study hard to benefit ourselves, but show little concern for others, even our brethren in Christ. "I must study hard, do my assignments, write my exams, and get good grades."

We justify our indifference to others by saying, “I must finish my studies, then I can spare time to think of others.” In reality, that day will never come because you will then pursue other goals after completing your education. There is no limit to the pursuit of knowledge or success.

Frankly speaking, our academic achievements benefit mainly ourselves. We rationalize our self-centeredness by saying that if we get good grades, we can eventually do something for others. In reality, when the time comes, our thinking will be so deeply entrenched in selfishness that it will be humanly impossible to change. It is hard to change a way of thinking that has been cultivated over many years in the pursuit of education and a career.

Yet Jesus tells us to do what is humanly impossible: turn away from self-preoccupation and self-betterment to a concern for the salvation of others.

## **(8) Being perfect or merciful is not a matter of self-improvement**

This leads to a vital point: we often confuse perfection with self-improvement. Is attaining perfection a matter of striving to improve myself in this area or that? That is how the world understands the attainment of perfection.

How do I become a good tennis player? I practice tennis day in and day out, improving my serve, improving my lob, improving my return, improving my drop shot. I take multi-vitamins, and jog for hours on end, building up my stamina.

I practice my swing and improve my accuracy. All these things help me to achieve perfection in tennis. This is perfection in terms of *self-improvement*, but if that is our concept of spiritual perfection, we are on the wrong track!

The Bible does not teach self-perfection because *self-perfection focuses on the self*. Using self-improvement to improve ourselves spiritually, we could go to a quiet monastery, and lock ourselves in a room in order to avoid people who distract us. Today we will pray three hours, tomorrow four hours, the day after five hours, and one of these days, 24 hours! I climb a ladder to heaven and achieve perfection and mystical union with God! In my self-improvement, I avoid irksome people and focus on God. I forget about human misery and think blessed thoughts about God, and arrive at perfect holiness.

We are not denying the value of having times of quietness and communion with God. When we are engaged in a busy ministry, such times are not only valuable, but even necessary to refocus on God, and to draw strength and inspiration from Him. What we are denying is that holiness is achieved by isolation as a way of life.

The human concept of self-improvement influences the way we think of the attainment of holiness. We think that a holy person is one who spends four hours praying in the morning. But what meaning can prayer have if it is not motivated by mercy? Intercession is a significant part of prayer. Worship, too, is an essential part of prayer.

Interestingly, the gospels do not portray Jesus as one who spent all his time kneeling in prayer. The picture of mercy comes out more strongly, for he was so busy doing things for people that he sometimes didn't have time to eat (Mk.3:20; 6:31). So how could the Lord spend four hours in prayer every day? Yet he did pray much, for he was in *constant communion* with the Father.

He did sometimes pray through the night, sacrificing much needed rest. Was he praying for himself or for others? For one whose whole life was driven by mercy and concern for the salvation of others, the answer is clear.

## **Self-improvement goes against Christ-like mercifulness**

Christ-like mercy is rooted in selflessness whereas self-improvement is preoccupied with the self. It is clear that *these two are opposites*. The “new man” (or “new self,” in some Bibles) grows in the renewal of the new life. But the Bible never says that the new man progresses by means of self-improvement. The old man tries to improve himself, but the new man is concerned with *growing* in Christ.

Biblical perfection has nothing to do with self-improvement, even when it involves long prayers and Bible reading. Prayer and Bible study are certainly important, *but only if we have finished with the old self*. If the self has not died, everything will simply cater to the self. Bible knowledge will become dangerous because the self will revel in its superiority

over others: “I’m a Bible expert!” Knowledge puffs up (1Cor.8:1), so Bible knowledge can be dangerous if the self has not died.

Our prayer life, too, can become a cause of pride. “I pray many hours, and my trousers are getting thin at the knees.” We become proud of our supposed spiritual superiority, as were the Pharisees. Hence Jesus warns his disciples of the leaven of the Pharisees (Luke 12:1). A little leaven (yeast) will make the whole lump of dough useless for the Passover (1Cor.5:6-8).

*“Whoever wants to save his life (Greek psychē, sometimes translated ‘soul’) will lose it, but whoever loses his life—forgets his life, denies himself—for me will find it” (Mt.16:25).* If we attend church primarily for our own salvation (to save our own soul or life), that may be the one thing we will not receive. Those who put God’s kingship and the salvation of others above their own interests, are the ones whom God chooses to save.

There is so much “breath and length and height and depth” (Eph. 3:18) to God’s mercy and wisdom; or as the apostle puts it in another place: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Romans 11:33)

## Chapter 14



# PERFECTION: ONENESS

“that they all may be one ...  
that they also may be one in us ...  
that they may be one just as we are one ...  
that they may be made perfect in one”  
(John 17:21-23, NKJV)

**T**hese words are spoken by Jesus in what is called his “high priestly prayer,” in which he makes profound and striking statements. The prayer becomes exceedingly meaningful when we examine it in the context of perfection. It is important to remember that perfection is not achievable in our own strength. Without God’s grace and power, perfection would be so unattainable that it would be pointless for us to even talk about it. But because it is God’s will that we be perfect, and because He is the Father of mercies (2Cor. 1:3) who gives us the power to do His will, we have no reason for not striving towards it.

In this chapter we look at another important aspect of perfection: *oneness*. Oneness is a synonym of perfection, as can be seen from the following parallels:

Be perfect as He is perfect  
Be holy as He is holy  
Be merciful as He is merciful  
Be one as He is one

We have considered the first three; let us turn our attention to the fourth, “Be one as He is one”. But before expounding it, we need to grasp four vital points regarding perfection as they apply to oneness in particular.

## PART ONE: FOUR MAIN POINTS ON PERFECTION

### **First: Perfection is part of salvation**

Paul says, “To this end (to present everyone perfect in Christ, v.28) I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Col.1:29). Paul doesn’t shrink from using words such as “labor” or “struggle” which the church avoids because they remind us of “works”.



What is Paul aiming for in toiling and striving with all his might? To present everyone “perfect” in Christ (v.28). If salvation is little more than regeneration, why would Paul work so hard to bring believers to perfection? He could simply say to the newly saved, “I wish you the best. You’re on your own now.”

In the prevailing situation today, what do churches do for the spiritual growth of the newly baptized? In most cases, nothing. Young Christians would be told to attend church and get involved in church activities, but generally there is no program of teaching or training for building them up step by step. Solid Biblical teaching is hard to find, so how will young Christians be built up spiritually through God’s word? And if the essential ingredient of *oneness* is missing in the spiritual life of a church, how can one grow up to spiritual perfection or maturity in that kind of environment?

Perfection has for the most part disappeared from the teaching on salvation. Instead there is a scornful or derisive tone about *perfectionism* or *perfectionists*, concepts that have nothing to do with the Biblical teaching of perfection. (See the Appended Note at the end of this chapter on the difference between perfection and perfectionism.)

God’s word has been given to us so that we may *grow up to salvation* (1Pet.2:2). Salvation has to do with growth, and growth is the evidence of the vigor of life. Growth is a process, just as salvation is a process rather than a one-time event. In the process of spiritual growth, we “grow up to salvation” with its goal being perfection or Christ-likeness.

Paul says that “we are to grow up in all aspects into him, who is the head, even Christ” (Eph.4:15).

If we are born of God, we would be “partakers of the divine nature” (2Pet.1:4), which is holy and merciful. Hence regeneration will inevitably take us on the road to perfection.

## **Second: Perfection is not a matter of deliberate policy**

Secondly, the progress towards perfection (whether as holiness, mercy or oneness) is not a calculated course of action that we decide to take, but *a spontaneous expression of the new life in Christ*. It is not an ethical policy but something that stems from an inner spiritual dynamic of the new life by which holiness and mercy become part of our nature. This distinction is vital. Occasionally I might show intentional mercy and give a few dollars to a beggar, making me feel good. An act of mercy doesn't necessarily stem from a merciful nature, but from my generous mood today, or from my belief that I should, as a matter of policy, show kindness from time to time because “it is good for my soul” or it is good in some way. The old ego is also capable of producing a few acts of generosity when it serves its purpose to do so.

But if we are truly regenerate, mercy will flow naturally from our innermost being. Having been born anew, we are moved by the Spirit to be merciful. It doesn't depend on any calculated intention on our part. Regeneration has transformed me into a new person with a new nature, and now I

am merciful because of that new nature in me. It is not the result of a calculation that goodness or holiness is a good social policy, or good for my mental health.

Most people agree that mercifulness is good. We can aspire to holiness for personal reasons, but if we don't have true inner holiness, we are no better than the Pharisees who have decided that holiness, or the appearance of it, serves a social purpose. The Pharisees think that it is good for them to be seen praying in public (Mt.6:1,5). Piety has its social rewards, especially in a religious society (as Israel was at that time). But this kind of piety doesn't stem from regeneration.

In talking about perfection, we are not promoting a human ideal that we think is good and desirable. Perfection is indeed a good ideal, but that is not why we press towards it. It is because we have been born anew, and consequently God's power impels us in the direction of perfection. As Paul puts it, "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil.2:13). One chapter later, he says, "I press on toward the goal" (3:14).

The pursuit of Christ-like perfection is the evidence of regeneration. Paul says, "Let a man examine himself" (1Cor. 11:28)—including whether he is regenerate. The question is not whether you think holiness is good. Every Christian agrees with that, but what counts is that a person has been made holy and merciful because God's Spirit has come into him, changing his nature and giving him an inner dynamic that moves him "to will and to work for His good pleasure".

A regenerate person, because he has God's life in him, will seek all the qualities of the divine nature comprehended in the word "perfection". As a partaker of the divine nature, the divine qualities now reside in him in nascent form and are in the process of growing. Conversely, anyone who feels a strong inner *resistance* to holiness, mercy, oneness, or perfection, ought to let the Lord examine him to see if he has been born anew.

If we have God's life in us, wouldn't we feel that He is at work in us that we pray for the *oneness* of His people? And isn't this evident in Jesus' prayer to the Father in John 17 when he prays for the oneness of those who belong to God, which is also a central concern of His Father?

### **Third: Perfection involves fruit-bearing**

In John 15, Jesus talks about *bearing fruit*. The word "fruit" occurs eight times in this chapter alone. Hence we live for the purpose of bearing fruit. Linking this to our previous point, fruit-bearing must also come from *an inner dynamic*. It is the inner life that causes a branch to bear fruit. Fruit-bearing doesn't depend on the branch's calculated conclusion that fruit-bearing is a good ideal.

If a branch fails to bear fruit, it will be thrown out and cast into the fire (John 15:6). It is a solemn warning that a branch that fails to bear fruit has failed to fulfill its purpose of being a branch. If it fails to pass on life, it will be cut off.

Being a part of the vine does not automatically guarantee a permanent place in the vine.

Perfection is the transmission of God's life through us to others. God has given us what we could call a "transmissive life"—a life that is transmitted or passed on to others. Let us ask ourselves whether or not we are branches that draw life into ourselves, giving nothing and producing nothing, reminding us of the Dead Sea into which water flows but none flows out. Its water is said to be "dead" because it remains stagnant in the Dead Sea.

From John 15 we see that life (salvation) is transmissive. If we seek salvation solely for our own benefit, keeping it to ourselves, we won't have it in the end. We wish that every evangelist would tell his listeners, "Do you want to be saved? Good! But if you selfishly keep salvation for yourself, or keep God's love to yourself without channeling it to others, you won't be saved."

On the authority of God's word, we can be sure that no one will be saved who fails to fulfill the transmissive principle of the new life in Christ, and to become a channel of God's love and life to others. The one who is concerned solely with his own salvation will be excluded from it. That is the Lord's clear teaching. "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, He takes away ... [such branches are] thrown away ... cast into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:2,6).

A vine does not produce individual fruits but clusters or bunches of fruit. A single grape comes from a cluster of many grapes. The fruit of the Spirit is a cluster of nine fruits; that

is why the word “fruit” is in the singular (Gal.5:22,23). The fruit of the Spirit is the fruit that the Spirit bears in us, not the fruit we bear from ourselves. The fruit we are called to bear is encapsulated in the words, “Go and make disciples” (Mt.28:19). Disciples form small units like clusters of grapes that grow together in oneness in the vine and its branches.

### **(1) The self-absorbed and materialistic mentality**

What militates so strongly against oneness in the church of God is that many Christians in this generation are more selfish than many non-Christians. Most Christians are preoccupied with themselves, their own blessings, their own salvation. Many Christian songs emphasize “me”. When I was looking for a hymn on the theme of passing on God’s love to others, I could not find one, neither in the Scripture index nor the subject index of the hymn book. The nearest title I could find was *Channels Only*.

We see ourselves as the main recipients of God’s salvation: “Hallelujah! God loves me and saves me and blesses me!” When this attitude pervades the church, it will breed people who are so selfish as to think that they don’t exist for God, but God exists for them. We fear for a Christian who has this kind of attitude because that person may be left without a share in eternal life. But the concern for people’s salvation ought to be universal. Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1John 2:2).

In his earthly ministry, Jesus never gave a thought for himself. After fasting forty days in the wilderness, he refused to turn one stone into bread to feed himself. In our thinking, it would have been reasonable for Jesus to use God's power to satisfy his hunger; yet he refused to use it for his own benefit. When the multitudes were hungry—5,000 men on one occasion, 4,000 on another, along with women and children—Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish for them, not for himself. This is transmissive love.

## **(2) Who is following whom?**

If we claim to be disciples of Jesus, what kind of Lord do we think we are following? Do we follow him, or do we treat him as following us? When we go on a road trip, does “I am with you always” (Mt.28:20) mean that we do things according to his will, or does it mean that he accompanies us to provide for our needs, protect us on the road, and take us to our destination on time? Who is following whom? Who is the Master and who is the servant?

Many Christian television programs preach a self-centered gospel with unabashed temerity. They are watched daily by millions in North America. God is there to do our bidding, to give us money, a car, a house, and a good life, provided that we have “faith”. The preacher would hold up his Bible and quote verses out of context to demonstrate his point.

This kind of teaching appeals to the natural man. Churches are filled with those who want to get things from

God. This kind of “faith” makes it seem as if God is obliged to give us whatever we want and to make us prosperous.

Despite the Bible waving during the preaching, this kind of “faith” has nothing in common with New Testament faith. The stark contrast comes out in Paul’s statement that “the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith” (1Tim.6:10). His personal motto is, “But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal.6:14)

Those who follow God don’t need to be anxious about their material needs, for our merciful God is totally committed to us. He cares for our every need when we follow Him. So how can anyone who has received God’s love and has gazed upon the cross of Jesus will still be preoccupied with pursuing his or her personal interests?

At the cross where the Son of God gave himself for us, we see the powerful evidence of his total commitment to us. His commitment to us is the vital first half of the story of our salvation. The other half is the call to us to be totally committed to God and His Son, a call to deny ourselves and follow God: to bring His eternal life to a world perishing in sin, and make disciples of all nations.



## **Fourth: Perfection is commanded**

Perfection is essential because it is commanded by the Lord. Even if we don't understand our first three points on perfection, we are obliged to be perfect because Jesus himself calls us to it. True believers will obey his commands without hesitation. Scripture speaks of the "obedience of faith" (Rom.1:5; 16:26). Conversely, disobedience negates faith.

Many Christians "believe" the gospel in some intellectual sense, but do not obey it. But God will "deal out retribution" to "those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2Th.1:8). There will be judgment on "those who do not obey the gospel of God" (1Pet.4:17).

From these verses, it is clear that the Gospel is not just to be believed but to be obeyed. That is because it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord. It is by being under his lordship that we are freed from the dominion of sin, and become new persons in him. If we should ever stop living under his lordship, we would fall back into the bondage of sin. But having been freed from the grip of sin, we gladly obey his commands as we live in fellowship with him.

Those who don't obey God show thereby that they don't have the "obedience of faith". Obedience is integral to, and is a vital constituent of, the saving faith which is mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans.

Do we think we will enter heaven on our own terms? Are we printing our own tickets to heaven because God's ticket is too costly? Many Christians have printed their own tickets to heaven with their own terms in fine print. On that day,

they will know at “the gates of heaven” whether their tickets are valid or not.

Many years ago before the start of the high-tech age, I was in a store in the Hong Kong district of Tsimshatsui, when some American tourists walked in. They handed over some cash, and the salesperson took out an instrument to scan an American bank note. A light turned on. The Americans were impressed, and asked him what the gadget was. He explained, “This device can tell whether a bank note is genuine or counterfeit. If it’s genuine, the device lights up. If it’s counterfeit, it doesn’t light up.” These Americans had never seen anything like this before, not even in America, nor had I seen one myself. Most people would hold a bank note up to the lights, but that is unreliable in this age of sophisticated counterfeiting.

## PART TWO: PERFECT IN ONENESS

### 1. “Perfected into one”

Let us now consider John 17:23:

I in them, and You in me; that they may be made *perfect in one*, and that the world may know that You have sent me, and have loved them as You have loved me. (John 17:23)

In these profound words, Jesus prays that God’s people may become “perfect in one” (literally “perfected into one”), that they may become perfectly one, and that the world will know that the Father has sent the Son, and has loved His people as He has loved Jesus! This is an amazing statement: The Father loves us as He loves Jesus, His most precious Son!

The fact that God’s love for us sinners could be mentioned in parallel with His love for His Son, in one sentence, is staggering. This astounding truth is demonstrated by the cross of Jesus, the place where God gave His own Son for our redemption. God’s perfect love for His people is what binds us into becoming “perfect in one”.

Since we are the object of God’s infinite self-giving love, wouldn’t that make our self-love redundant? The vast ocean of God’s love can fill our little cup of self, but will never be contained within it. Selfishness is therefore pointless. God’s love can fill everyone in the body of Christ, yet cannot be contained by all of us put together. If we could empty ourselves by pouring out that love to others, we would be instantly refilled!

God’s people are to be one as He is one. That is parallel to what we have been discussing all along: be holy as He is holy, be merciful as He is merciful, be perfect as He is perfect — *be one as He is one*. These four are similar in principle but the last one is different from the others in that it is not stated as a command but as a prayer for God’s people, that they may be brought into *oneness through His indwelling presence* in them—“I in them” (John 17:23).

Every quality is possible in us through God's indwelling presence, but this prayer shows that *God's presence is linked specifically to oneness*. Since oneness is the measure of God's presence in us, all the other qualities in us depend for their fulfillment on His oneness in us.

The other parallels (be holy, be merciful) become realities in us only insofar as His indwelling presence is able (i.e., not hindered by us) to draw us into an ever-stronger oneness with God and with each other. Conversely, if the oneness in God's people is weak, then holiness, mercy, and the other qualities of His nature in them will be proportionately weak.

## **2. Perfection is communal, not individual**

In speaking of unity, I am still addressing the crucial topic of perfection. The two are linked together in the following important point: *Perfection is a communal endeavor, not just a personal matter*. There can be no perfection without oneness. When we think of perfection, we tend to think of a solitary individual striving for perfection. There is some truth to this, but not the whole truth. That is because perfection in Scripture is a communal matter, a view that is contrary to the prevailing understanding today. It has become a cliché among evangelicals to speak of a "personal" salvation or a "personal" Savior, which cater to our egoistic individualism. Today we have personal checks, personal computers, personal everything.

The term “personal salvation” is fine if it is understood as expressing the need for each person to get right with God. It is right to emphasize the need for a personal, direct, and living relationship with the living God in regard to salvation.

## **The importance of correct emphasis**

The stress on the personal in all areas of the Christian life to the neglect of the communal is as disturbing as it is wrong because the emphasis in Scripture is quite the reverse. Scripture constantly stresses the communal, that we are one body in Christ, that we share in one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph.4:4-6), emphasizing what we have in common rather than what is personal. In John 17, Jesus prays for the oneness in the community of his disciples as a whole.

Yesterday I was reading on the history of church dogma, and what I read shows the importance of what one stresses. The writer, a German professor, in his now classic work on the history of dogma, says that the difference between Calvin and Luther is fundamentally a difference of emphasis. Calvin stresses law and decrees as well as God’s plan in predestination, but Luther stresses God’s love for man. That is a vital difference, and the writer argues that Luther is closer to the Scriptural emphasis than is Calvin.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The work referred to is that of Paul Tillich. Reihold Seeberg, a professor of church history and systematic theology in Germany, writes similarly: “The God of Calvin is the omnipotent Will, ruling throughout the world; the God of Luther is the omnipotent energy of Love manifest

What you emphasize is very important because it will, in the long term, affect the way you think and behave. If we keep on stressing the personal, this can only lead to individualism at the expense of oneness and community. “I will do what I think is right!”

## Spiritual lessons from world events

In the seventies and eighties, many were intrigued by the strength of the Japanese economy. (It declined later on, but this was mainly in the 21st century.) The strength of the Japanese nation lay exactly here, in the stress on the communal rather than the individual (though that may be changing due to Western influence). The West was mystified that the Japanese could go from strength to strength when the once powerful West German economy was struggling with deficits and economic problems. They looked across the globe and said, “Japan used to lag behind Germany, but now it has reached Germany’s level, even surpassing it in some areas.”

The economic problems in the West were partly the result of an ongoing series of strikes pressing for better pay

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in Christ. In the one case (Calvin), we have acts of compulsion even in the heart, subjection, law, service; in the other (Luther), inward conquest by the power of love, free self-surrender, filial love without compulsion. The one does not necessarily exclude the other; but *the tone and emphasis* give rise to the differences (between Calvin and Luther) which undeniably exist.” *The History of Doctrines*, p.416, paperback, 1977, Baker Book House, italics mine.

and better benefits. In some cases, the companies affected by strikes were already on the verge of financial collapse, but the strikers put their personal benefits first, jeopardizing the survival of the companies.

In the United Kingdom where we lived for many years, there was a time when there were strikes, strikes, and more strikes! A garbage collectors' strike created mountains of garbage everywhere. If you ask the workers if they care about the community, the answer would be: "With the rising cost of living we need more pay." Then the nurses went on strike, and many others followed suit. We do, of course, sympathize with the financial needs of all who work for a living. That is not the issue. But do we solve problems by insisting on my personal needs and rights irrespective of its impact on the community?

But the Japanese function communally, usually within the context of the companies they work for. When a company's financial situation improves through revenue growth, it will be in a position to raise the individual's salary. The individual will do better and better all the time. He knows that his well-being is tied to that of his company; that is why he is loyal to his company, and doesn't want to destroy it with strikes. As the company does better, he does better. (The problems that later plagued the Japanese economy have been much debated, and have been blamed on various factors, but never to my knowledge on the Japanese sense of community.)

In saying this, we have no intention of endorsing one social system over another. But we must express alarm when we see that the church is conforming to the individualistic mentality that is so pervasive in the West. It is a mortal danger for the church to conform to the world.

If individualism is the way to go, we church ministers ought to form a union! When the church deals unfairly with us, we will go on strike and teach the people a lesson: “You talk about *personal* salvation? Let’s talk about my *personal* salary. If you don’t give me a raise, I will go on strike! Next Sunday you will have no minister. Want to get baptized? No pay, no baptism!”

Few pastors would put it as bluntly as that, but this sentiment is actually quite prevalent, even if expressed in more discreet language. They may put the matter before the church committee in this way: “My pay is inadequate by the standards of society, so let’s give ourselves a month to adjust it. As reasonable people, we will handle it in a reasonable manner. But if you don’t come up with a raise by next month, please be aware that other churches are looking for a minister like me.” It boils down to personal benefit. What happens to the church is secondary. I am not exaggerating. A pastor personally known to me promptly left the church he was serving in when presented with an attractive offer from another church. He did this even though his church was left without a pastor and could not find one for a long time.



## Is holiness mainly an individual attainment in Scripture?

When it comes to holiness, the Bible likewise stresses the communal, not the personal. Yet some think that they need to isolate themselves (in a monastery, for example) to attain *personal* perfection. “I’ll lock myself in a room. Don’t disturb me until I become holy.” He turns his back on everyone, shuts the door, and pursues holiness. The intention may seem right, but the approach is wrong because we are to grow in holiness together.

Paul says, “The whole body (the church), supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (Col.2:19)—a description of spiritual growth, not numerical growth.

God causes the individual member and the Body to grow together such that the individual grows in holiness in tandem with the Body. This stands in contrast to the notion of a solitary “holy man” who gets along fine by himself apart from the rest of the Body of Christ.<sup>35</sup>

If God’s life and God’s love are transmissive, they will flow out to others. The spiritual life by its nature cannot be a solely individual matter. As my life grows in holiness, it will affect someone else. That person will in turn show me

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<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that we shouldn’t have longer or shorter periods of time to be quiet before God alone. Paul mentions that he went to Arabia for a time after his Damascus road experience of Christ, but doesn’t say how long he was there (Gal.1:17). The length of time will depend on God’s leading.

brotherly love, causing me to grow even more. This is the interchange of life, the essence of life in one body. We grow together as one body or we don't grow as we ought to. That is why we are disturbed by the almost universal cancerous disease of individualism which is innate to the natural man.

### **3. Becoming overcomers together**

Let us recall that holiness, in Biblical teaching, is not the eradication of sin from our lives, neither in the individual nor in the church, but the victorious overcoming of sin. We wrestle with the reality of sin every day, both on the individual level and as a community, but we overcome sin by drawing on God's power and living by His grace.

Grace doesn't come into our lives only once, as a one-time event when we believed in Jesus. On the contrary, we live by grace day by day, moment by moment. Salvation is indeed by grace alone, but it is not a one-time event of grace. It is a grace that continues unceasingly through our earthly pilgrimage, helping us to overcome sin.

The Bible, notably in Revelation, depicts the Christian as one who "overcomes". Each of the letters to the seven churches mentions overcoming (Rev.2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12, 21). The true Christian overcomes sin. For the church it means that we fight sin *together*. There is no need to pretend that we are holier than we really are. Pretense will only deprive us of help and prayer support because people will be unaware of our problems and needs. We don't need to

pretend that we are holier than the next guy. He is fighting sin as I am. If we fight the battle shoulder to shoulder, we will win together.

That is the beauty of life in the body. We say to one another, “This is my weakness, what is yours?” As we become one in Christ, we will win the battle together. Oneness is achieved by an open attitude to one another, sharing the realization that the battle is not won individually but together. Paul speaks of striving for the faith “side by side” (ESV) in one mind and one spirit (Phil. 1:27). Isn’t that a beautiful picture?

Which is the most difficult sin to overcome? Isn’t it our natural inclination towards selfishness in all its forms: our persistent concern for our own interests, our pride or self-pity, our insisting on our own ways and opinions, our impatience with others, our critical spirit, and our inconsiderateness?

#### **4. Three aspects of oneness**

There are three vital aspects to oneness, and these summarize Jesus’ teaching in John 17. The three are: our relationship to God, our relationship to one another, and our relationship to the world.

##### **First: Our relationship with God**

John 17 depicts our relationship with God in terms of oneness with God: “That they may all be one; even as You,

Father, are in me, and I in You, that they also may be in us” (v.21)—the Father in Jesus, Jesus in the Father, and we disciples in God and the Son of God.

Oneness with God is an *internal* unity with Him, a unity of spirits. People often think of unity in an organizational sense, but true unity takes place at the deepest level of the spirit. Oneness with God, which takes place on the spiritual level, is something that God draws us into. It is not something that we attain by our own efforts. Jesus says, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). He draws us into an intimate union with himself: “I in them, they in me.” The one is in the other. It involves the deepest possible inner communication. You and I are united only because we are one with God and the Son of God.

If we are one with the Lord Jesus, we will know his mind. This is brought out in First Corinthians, especially in the noteworthy statement, “We have the mind of Christ” (2:16). The term “the mind of Christ” appears nowhere else in the New Testament. If we have the mind of Christ, we would understand his way of thinking and doing things. How else can we pray to God according to His will unless we pray with the same mind in which Jesus prays to the Father?

Do you have a hard time praying? In the case of most Christians, the answer is “yes” in all likelihood. How can we pray if we don’t have oneness with God? Prayer would be meaningless if we cannot communicate with Him. On the human level, it is frustrating to talk with someone who is on

a different wavelength. He says one thing but you take it to mean something else. So he says, “That’s not what I meant.” But you say, “That’s exactly what you said. How do I interpret your statement apart from the words you use?” Communication breaks down when one party says something but the other party understands it differently. Eventually one side will say, “I’ll go watch TV because at least the TV won’t argue with me.” Man’s best friend is the television set because it never talks back. You can pound on it, and it won’t hit back. Entertainment comes out of the box non-stop. If you don’t like one channel, you can switch to another. With hundreds of channels, that’s is enough to keep you entertained.

Do we commune with God, or are we on different wavelengths from Him? Unless we are one with Him in heart and mind, with our wills united and harmonized, communion would be impossible.

Of course we can recite a profound prayer from a prayer book or say pious words in prayer. But that is a religious exercise rather than communion with God. Without a union of our hearts and minds with His, no real communion can take place. We must take time to ensure that our spirits are completely in tune with His. There is no communion without union; hence the importance of oneness with Him.

## **Second: Our relationship to one another**

The second point: We are to be united with one another by mutual understanding. But first we need to be united with

God. Only when everyone is in union with God and able to communicate with Him, will we be able to have inner understanding and communication with one another. In other words, our union with one another is rooted in our union with God.

These two things—our relationship to God and our relationship to one another—are tied together in John 17. Verse 11 says, “That they may be one, even as we are one”. Verse 21 says, “that they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in me, and I in You, that they also may be in us”. The constant refrain—*that they may be one*—appears four times in this chapter (verses 11,21,22,23).

Oh that we may delight in one another! But it’s hard to delight in someone who is not walking with the Lord, isn’t it? A person who walks with God, who is united with God, who has the mind of Christ, and who communes with God—such a person is refreshing. The television set is no match for him. Try sharing your personal problems with a TV. When your boyfriend or girlfriend leaves you, try talking to the TV about it. You will begin to see that your brother or sister—if he or she is walking with God—is much more precious.

The one who walks with God refreshes others. When you approach such a person, your problems become lighter and may even start to vanish. The secret is nothing more than this: he or she is passing on God’s life, love, mercy, power, truth, wisdom and kindness to you. Suddenly your problems diminish, and you begin to appreciate your brother or sister.

When we give ourselves to one another, bearing each other's burdens and taking each other to heart, we will experience the oneness that God has called us to.

### **Third: Our relationship to the world**

How does oneness relate to the world? The answer is found in verse 21: "That they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that You have sent me."

So that the world may believe because of our oneness! But what is our outreach strategy in this generation? We emphasize missions and evangelistic campaigns. Is this how we are going to save the world? Many churches think so. In North America, "missiology" is a popular subject in seminaries. I had never heard of it in England but they have it here in North America. Missiology is the study of missions. Even missions have become a kind of "science" (an "-ology") that studies the techniques and strategies of evangelism.

But what does John 17 tell us? Unless we are one, the world won't believe in the way it is meant to believe. Brothers and sisters, there is no shortcut to world evangelism.

People have asked me, "Why don't you go out on missions?" In fact I have done more missionary outreach than have most people and most pastors. Have you done door to door evangelism? I have done that many times. I have spoken to people at the door, or, if I am invited in, inside the house. Have you distributed gospel tracts? I have given out tracts on the streets and on cross-harbor ferry

boats. Have you preached in the open? I have preached on city streets and thoroughfares. Have you ever tried preaching at the marketplace next to fruit vendors, your voice competing with theirs? I have stood on soap boxes and preached in marketplaces. And what about person-to-person evangelism? I have done that on buses and airplanes. Have you organized an evangelistic campaign? I have organized such campaigns, and have preached at these myself. Indeed, I have been greatly involved in evangelism and missions. But over the years, my eyes have opened to the realization that so long as the church is not what God meant it to be, we won't be able to reach the world effectively.

It grieves me when a non-Christian says, "Look at the church. What's so special about it?" I have nothing to say in reply. The non-Christian is quite right when he says, "Church people are so ordinary. They claim to be saved and transformed by God's power, but I see nothing special in their lives." What excuses do we give? The standard reply is, "Don't look at the church, look to God." The non-Christian will say, "So you're admitting that Christians are no different from non-Christians? Why would I want to be a Christian?"

"That's beside the point," some may say. Sorry, but that is precisely the point! If regeneration doesn't transform a person, what is the point of regeneration? If you say it is to get to heaven, the non-Christian will say, "Will heaven then be full of selfish, untransformed people?"

By all means, go out and knock on doors, and get "decisions" for the Lord. I have done this too. But God has



His own ways of doing things. We cannot bypass or short-circuit His ways. We cannot effectively bring salvation to the world unless God's people become one in God and Christ, and manifest God's glory.

Is God not dishonored when people say, "Christians are fighting over the ownership of the church building, even suing each other in court"? And you say that's beside the point?

Jesus prayed, "That they may be one ... that the world may believe that You have sent me." There is no shortcut to effective evangelism and the salvation of the world. When the churches, or a part of them, are united spiritually and not just organizationally, God's power will be manifested so powerfully that non-Christians will be drawn to Him.

We praise God that a good number of people have come to Him in this church, even when we have not organized evangelistic campaigns, given out tracts, or knocked on doors. People are being drawn to God, and they are being changed into new persons in Christ because of the love and oneness they see in the church. This amply demonstrates the truth of the Lord's words, namely, that our oneness draws the world to believe in him.

## **5. Is oneness possible?**

Is oneness attainable? Or is it a naive dream? Looking at the churches today and over the past two millennia, we may be forgiven for wondering what has happened to Jesus' prayer

for oneness. It's not that the Lord Jesus is unfamiliar with human nature. He had observed the behavior of the twelve disciples he had chosen to be with him. They had their good qualities, yet their weaknesses were also evident. He knew not only his disciples, but "He knew all men" and just how unreliable they can be (Jn.2:24). "He knew what was in man" (v.25).

How is oneness among men conceivable unless man is so transformed that "not I, but Christ" becomes an established reality in everyone who is a part of that oneness? The disharmony of just one member will disturb the harmony of the body. Anyone who has a toothache—and a tooth is a tiny member of the body—would understand this point.

But if the harmony of the members within the Body is envisioned in Jesus' prayer for oneness, and if the church is to be one as God is one with His Son, then we might be inclined to think that this dream is unrealizable at this present time on earth. We may think that it can be realized only when God's redeemed people are perfectly transformed in body and spirit in the age to come, in heaven.

Since the final perfection of our spirits and bodies in heaven is the certain outcome of our redemption in Christ Jesus, the need for him to pray for something that is not in doubt does not seem to make sense. In other words, this cannot be what he was praying for. We are then forced to conclude that he was praying for something to be realized on earth in the present age and in the age to come. Moreover, in the future age to come, the time for the world to believe

in Christ will have passed, so the central purpose of Jesus' prayer for oneness, namely, "that the world may believe," will no longer be relevant.

If Jesus is praying for something to be realized among his people in the present age, what exactly is he praying for?

In the present age, given the innate selfishness of the human heart as well as its self-assertiveness, is it at all realistic to expect oneness of any community of human beings on earth? Disunity and schisms existed already as early as the Corinthian church. And didn't Jesus himself make it clear that the enemy has sown weeds among the wheat, such that wheat and weeds coexist within the kingdom of God? Surely there is no harmony between wheat and weeds! So oneness of the whole church in the present world is, in the nature of the case, unrealizable. Even a local church like the one at Corinth failed to attain it.

Faced with these solid facts from the Bible, we ask: What exactly was the Lord praying for, since he knows these facts better than we? It was he himself who taught us the parable of the weeds (Mt.13:24-30, 36-43). He also taught about the sheep and the goats, which are not separated until the final judgment (Mt. 25:31-46). Again there is no possibility of oneness or harmony between these disparate entities.

## **6. The steps to actual oneness as seen in Scripture**

In the light of these barriers, what did Jesus envision in his prayer for oneness? Only one possible answer remains: The

oneness of those who are faithful to him, who, like the disciples at Jerusalem, will be of “one heart and one mind” (Acts 2:46; 4:32). To understand this answer more fully, other pertinent facts must be taken into account:

(1) *Mutual acquaintance is necessary as a starting point for oneness.* On the practical level, there can be no meaningful oneness between persons who don't know each other personally. We can speak of being united because of belonging to the same race or nationality, or even by the fact of being human (“from one,” Acts 17:26). But even within that union of identity, the fact is that I cannot be actually and functionally one with someone who is a stranger to me.

The oneness for which Jesus prayed has to be a union of those who know each other within a particular community of his disciples, such as that at Jerusalem. It is the people we *see* whom we are called to love (1Jn.4:20).

But even within a particular community, a person cannot know all the other people equally. Usually only members of a small group within that community are more intimately acquainted. Therefore, *spiritual oneness* is more readily established within smaller units of a community of the Lord's disciples. Oneness can be built up within smaller units through mutual caring and encouragement, doing household chores together, and helping each other serve God effectively. The stronger the bond of oneness, the greater the spiritual effectiveness of the unit.

(2) *A small group provides the basis for oneness on a wider scale.* Matthew 18:19-20 mentions a gathering of only two or three. Many great spiritual movements, including missionary movements and societies, started with a small number of people united in heart and mind. These movements have had a great impact on the growth of the church and the evangelizing of the world. The early Methodist movement is one among many such examples.

It is not the quantity but the quality that counts. In general, the greater the number of people involved in a group, the weaker the bond in that group. It is well known that a large committee functions less efficiently than a smaller one. But when a large committee is subdivided into smaller ones, each with its own special responsibilities, efficiency improves.

This is indeed what Jesus had in mind, namely, the establishing and proliferation of small, tightly knit cells, which together form the larger body of God's people, "the body of Christ". This can be seen in the brief but significant statement in Matthew 18:19,20:

Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything they may ask, it shall be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst.

If oneness cannot be established even in a small unit of two or three persons, it would be nonsensical to expect the whole community to be one. It means that the unity of the body

depends on the oneness of its cells. In turn the unity between the various cells is established through the unity of the cell leaders, thereby establishing the oneness of the community. For if the leaders are not united as one, how can the church be one?

Looking at the Lord's own teaching and practice, we see that the small unit he had in mind could range from two to twelve persons. Two is the smallest functional unit as can be seen from the verse quoted above, while twelve is the largest functional unit.

When Jesus sent out the 70 disciples (some versions say 72), he sent them out in pairs (Lk.10:1). But when the twelve were sent out, there was no mention of such an arrangement (Mt. 10:1f). This doesn't necessarily mean that the twelve went out as one group; it could also mean that in their case, the functional units for their mission were variable in number (there could have been units of two, three, or four). Our conclusions need not be rigid in this matter.

(3) *The cell can serve as the base for spiritual growth in the Body of Christ.* The vital importance of oneness at the cell level lies in the fact that this oneness, because it derives from God's life in us, can grow and spread to other small groups through regular interaction between members of one cell with those of other cells. The oneness of the cells then becomes the catalyst for the oneness of the body. The general health of the body depends on the health of its cells, and vice versa.

This oneness, beginning at the cell level, must not be something merely organizational but something profoundly *spiritual*. This is central to Jesus' high priestly prayer. It is God's own oneness with Jesus that is the basis of our oneness as his disciples: "That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21). Our oneness derives from our being in Christ, and not from our organizational efforts nor even from our imitating Christ. It is a oneness brought about by his life working in us through the Holy Spirit as we abide in him. It is a oneness that is established by God, not man. It is the church of the living God, not merely a church of people.

Hence creating divisions within a community of God's people, damaging or destroying its oneness, is an act of the most heinous type in God's eyes. He will destroy its perpetrators (1Cor.3:17). Scattering the Lord's people is an act of hostility against the Lord himself: "He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Mt.12:30; Lk.11:23). But those who labor to draw his people into oneness are working *with Jesus* for the building up of the church.

## **7. The Lord is one**

"God is holy" and "God is merciful" are descriptions of God that are more familiar to Christians than "God is one". But in Scripture, God's oneness is affirmed as a fundamental truth just like His holiness and mercifulness. Right from the

start of His relationship with Israel, God said to them, “*Hear, O Israel! Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one!*” (Dt. 6:4). This is to be understood as a numerical one—that Yahweh is one in number—yet there is also the truth that God is a God of oneness.

In answer to a question that someone had asked him about which is the foremost commandment, Jesus quoted the same words from Deuteronomy when he said, “The foremost is, ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord’” (Mark 12:29). Then he continued on with the rest of the command: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (v.30, quoting Dt.6:5).

If God’s oneness is as much a part of His divine nature as His mercy, love, holiness and other attributes, would it not follow that if we become partakers of His nature, these same attributes will become a reality in our lives? Wouldn’t it also mean that anyone who doesn’t partake of these qualities shows thereby that he or she isn’t a partaker of the divine nature and don’t have the new life?

## **Two aspects of God’s oneness**

There are two aspects of God’s oneness *as it relates to us*:

(1) It affects us *internally*, uniting our inner being. Most people today live in a condition of inner tension. In the West, millions of people are dependent on stress-relieving



drugs to get through the day. Stress confronts us in daily life, whether at work, at school, in family relationships or, above all, within our own selves. When it becomes a serious medical condition, it might be diagnosed as schizophrenia or another ailment, in which case one is usually placed under the care of a psychiatrist.

In some circumstances, stress can result in an inner disintegration of the person. Stress is known to cause a host of physical problems such as hypertension, heart disease, and other potentially fatal conditions even when it doesn't get as far as mental breakdown.

On the other hand, oneness is the opposite of inner conflict, tension, disintegration, and breakdown. Oneness is an inner peace and harmony. Inner peace is so vital for the Christian life that every letter of Paul begins with a greeting such as, "Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". *Shalom* (peace) is the standard greeting among the Jews from ancient times to the present day. Without an inner oneness, there would be no inner peace. The Psalmist prays, "Teach me Your way, Yahweh; I will walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name" (Psalm 86:11, NIV has "give me an undivided heart").

(2) God's oneness as *being external* to our person, enabling relationship with those around us. The internal and the external are inextricably linked. If we lack inner peace, our inner conflicts are bound to affect the way we relate to others, while the conflicts of others could likewise harm our

inner stability. The inner oneness of each person in a group is essential for the oneness of the group as a whole. Unity and harmony within a group has a unifying and stabilizing effect on the inner life of its individual members.

Where there is sin there is no peace, neither in the individual nor in the community. Sin seeks an opportunity to destroy our peace, internal or external, so it is wise for everyone who follows the Lord to identify which sins pose specific dangers to him or her in particular, for different people have different weaknesses. We will then be in a better position to implement the Lord's exhortation, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (Mt.26:41; Mk.14:38).

Cell units likewise need to be aware of the kinds of sin that could threaten, harm, or even destroy the oneness, and therefore the life of the whole unit. It is helpful to discuss these things with one another from time to time, and to put the specific problems before God in prayer, for *a cell within the Body of Christ will only be as strong or as weak as the oneness within it.*

Sin must be dealt with. Our internal and external oneness, peace, and harmony can be secured because God has provided the effective answer to the fatal effects of sin on our lives. What God has done in regard to sin is summed up in the words: "through him (Christ) to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col.1:20, NIV). Even if we don't understand the full meaning of this statement, we can still experience its

truth and power by the fact that where internal or external oneness and peace are lacking, *oneness can be established through Jesus' atoning and reconciling blood*. As a result, every sin can be confessed and cleansed away. At the cross, God has provided peace and reconciliation for all who seek them with all their hearts.

## AN APPENDED NOTE: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PERFECTION AND PERFECTIONISM

*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* gives three useful definitions of "perfectionism".

First, "the doctrine that the perfection of moral character constitutes man's highest good". This has to do with the self-improvement which, as we saw in the last chapter, is at odds with Biblical perfection. The Scriptures show that man's highest good is to be found in the *spiritual* rather than the *moral* aspect of life.

Second, "the theological doctrine that freedom from sin is attainable on earth". This is true or false depending on what is meant by "freedom from sin". If by this it is meant that we are no longer under the bondage to sin because of Christ's atoning death for us and because we have died to sin with him (Romans 6), then this is correct. But if the definition is understood to mean that sin has been totally

eliminated from our being such that we have become sinless and even incapable of sinning, then it is certainly false.

Third, “a disposition to regard anything short of perfection as unacceptable”. This, again, is true or false depending on how it is understood and applied. We have already noted the importance of ensuring that things are perfect if they are to function properly.

A tire that loses air because of a tiny imperfection in the valve could leave the car stranded on a highway. This could create a potentially life threatening situation in the depths of a Canadian winter. A few years ago, because of a tiny undetectable defect in the braking system of the car I was driving, the brakes suddenly failed on a busy highway, almost resulting in a fatal accident. One undetected imperfection can lead to a traffic disaster. By God’s protection and mercy, no one was hurt, and there was no major damage except to the old car I was driving.

If, however, Webster’s definition is understood to mean a perfection that is judged by what is acceptable or unacceptable *to me*, that is, a subjective and self-centered “perfection” (expressed, for example, by my being demanding on others), then this sort of perfection is certainly false where Scripture is concerned. In the last chapter we saw that *true spirituality is never self-centered*.

The fact that there are a number of definitions of “perfectionism” should alert us to the fact that there are right and wrong definitions. But we cannot simply throw out

perfection all together just because there are incorrect perceptions of it.

That is all the more so because our concern is with *Biblical* perfection and not with some general concept of perfection. It is therefore erroneous, indeed irresponsible, before God to label *any* reference to, or concern for, perfection as “perfectionism,” a term that is usually meant pejoratively. Yet the Biblical teaching on perfection has vanished from most churches, notwithstanding the fact that the gospel—the *whole* counsel of God (Acts 20:27)—includes not only regeneration but also perfection, which finds its perfect embodiment in Christ.



## Chapter 15



# PERFECTED THROUGH CHRIST'S SACRIFICE FOR US

### **Too easily satisfied with regeneration**

**R**egeneration, renewal, and perfection cover the scope of the Christian life from beginning to end. Christians today don't hear much about the Biblical teaching of perfection, and are often left with only regeneration. And even in the matter of regeneration they seldom receive adequate teaching. And where regeneration is actually taught, usually little else is taught in regard to salvation, so we are left to wonder if the Christian life has anything beyond being born again.

What takes place *after* you are born again? We are often given the impression that nothing much more happens, and that regeneration is more or less the end of the matter. But

in our study of God's word, we have seen that *regeneration* is only the start of a process called *renewal*, which ultimately leads on to *perfection*.

## **The Old Testament sacrificial system**

Let us continue our study of perfection in the light of God's word, particularly in the book of Hebrews. I wonder if today's subject may be too deep for Christians today. Many are accustomed to elementary and even superficial teaching, and anything beyond that is often too difficult for some Christians to handle.

I will be touching on the Old Testament sacrificial system as well as the teaching about it in the New Testament, hence my concern whether the subject may be too hard for some readers. But how can we understand the Bible if we don't understand the sacrificial system? We can hardly open the Old Testament without reading something about the sacrificial system. The New Testament, too, has many references to it, and the book of Hebrews is a full exposition of it.

## **Why did Jesus have to die?**

Let us begin with an often-asked question: Why did Jesus have to die in order to save us? Why couldn't God save us simply by forgiving us our sins? Couldn't He have said to us, "I forgive all your sins," and closed the matter at that? Why was Jesus' death necessary?



If God's holiness, righteousness and purity are alien concepts to us, and if we don't know what the purpose of the sacrificial system is, then obviously we wouldn't understand why it was necessary for Jesus to die in order to save us. That is why we say to ourselves, "Why couldn't God just forgive us our sins without the sacrifice of Jesus?"

But if that could truly be done, wouldn't God have thought of it Himself? We often imagine that we have seen something God has overlooked!

In addressing this question, we are not dealing with advanced theology but with the very basics of salvation. I will try to explain the matter as simply as possible without technicality, if at all possible. I aim to make this complex subject as simple as the Lord enables me.

## **It is not whether we accept God, but whether He accepts us**

The first point we must grasp about the sacrificial system is this: In Scripture, the point is not whether we accept God but whether God accepts us. Many preachers in their good intentions have turned the matter upside down. They are always talking about accepting Christ, accepting salvation, as though everything depended on our accepting him. Jesus is portrayed as a rather pitiful character who stands at the door of our hearts. He keeps on knocking, apparently with some degree of desperation, on the door of our hearts—a door, it is stressed, that has no knob that he can access from

the outside. They derive this picture from Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with me.”

To apply this verse in this way is to tear it out of its context because Jesus addresses these words to *Christians*, not unbelievers. He is speaking to the Christians who have rejected him from their lives even though they once had “accepted” him. Jesus is in effect saying to the Christians of Laodicea: “You who claim to be my people are in reality living without me, having excluded me from your lives. But if there is still anyone among you who hears my call and opens his heart to me, we will have sweet fellowship together”.

This sad picture is familiar to anyone who is acquainted with the Old Testament prophetic writings. It was an accusation that the prophets leveled against Israel time and again. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and many others proclaimed to Israel: “I have called you to be My people and the people of My covenant, yet you have excluded Me from your lives, not necessarily in word but in deed.”

It is wrong exegesis to apply Revelation 3:20 to non-Christians. Many evangelists have turned the matter upside down, portraying the Lord as a pitiable character who pleads for acceptance at the door of the hearts of unbelievers.

The truth is that you and I, rather than God or Christ, are the pitiful ones. It is we who need to plead for His mercy and acceptance, because to be accepted by Him is life and to be rejected by Him is death. The God of love, justice and

holiness will accept us only if we approach Him on His terms. The apostles didn't preach a pitiful God or pitiful Christ who pleads at the door of our hearts. Paul proclaims that God, as Lord of all, "commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30, "commands" translates *parangellō*, παραγγέλλω, "give orders, command, instruct, direct," BDAG).

As for Revelation 3:20, we ask: Should there have been a closed door between the Lord and the Laodicean (or any) church in the first place? What does that tell us about the spiritual condition of that church? If the door was closed, it was not Jesus who closed it because it was he who called on them to open it. If they open it, fellowship with him can be renewed, as depicted by sharing a meal together.

It is hard to imagine that a church could ever close its door on Jesus! In his graciousness, he calls on them to remove the obstacle to fellowship by opening the door. The call to open the door is a *rebuke* for having closed it, a warning of *discipline* if they remain obstinate, and a call to *repentance*. All these things are expressed in the previous verse, "*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent*" (v.19). The Lord is being gracious in calling them to repentance after having given them a stern rebuke (vv.15-18). They are called to overcome sin (v.21). The closed door represents the barrier caused by the sins mentioned in the preceding verses, which separate them from their God (Isaiah 59:2).

## New Testament references

The New Testament has many references to being acceptable to the Lord or being accepted by him, but remarkably few references to our accepting him.

With one exception, all New Testament references to receiving or not receiving Jesus are found in the gospels. There is one reference in Mark, but it is of an indirect character: “Whoever receives one child like this in my name receives me” (9:37). It has no direct bearing on the present subject. There is also only one reference in Luke where it reports that the Samaritans were unwilling to receive Jesus into their village (9:53). John mentions that the Galileans were willing to receive Jesus (4:45), and John 1:11 and 5:43 state that the Jews in general refused to accept him. But those who receive him are given the right to become children of God (1:12). These are all the references there are in the gospels, and only the last three have any direct reference to receiving Jesus into our hearts.

Outside the gospels, there is only one reference to “accepting Jesus”: “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him” (Col.2:6). Here it is not merely a question of “accepting Jesus” but of receiving him as Lord.<sup>36</sup>

By contrast, the New Testament uses at least six different Greek words to express the idea of our being pleasing or acceptable to God or to Christ, or being accepted by Him. All these passages are of great importance for us. For

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<sup>36</sup> BDAG defines it as, “*παραλ. τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησ.* *accept Christ Jesus*, i.e. the proclamation of him as Lord, Col 2:6”.

example: “Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God” (Rom.15:7). Or, “You ... a holy priesthood, to offer up sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1Pet.2:5). Further references to the six Greek words are found in this footnote.<sup>37</sup>

The KJV and NKJV give a beautiful translation of Ephesians 1:6: “He has made us accepted in the Beloved”. The word translated “accepted” is the verb form of the Greek word for “grace,” and it means to “bestow favor upon, favor highly, bless”. God has “accepted” us in Christ, His Beloved One.

Summarizing our observations: We need to receive or accept Jesus provided it isn't just a mental or intellectual acceptance of Jesus as a good person, or as someone who forgives us our sins and blesses us with whatever we want. It must mean nothing less than receiving Jesus into our hearts as the Lord and Savior of our lives. The same can be said of God the Father.

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<sup>37</sup> (1) “ἀποδεκτός means *acceptable* and ἀπόδεκτος *pleasing*, 1Ti.2:3; 5:4.” (2) “εὐάρεστος, *pleasing, acceptable* (said of pers. and things)” Rom.12:1,2; 14:18 (3) “εὐπρόσδεκτος, (easily) *acceptable, pleasant, welcome*” Rom.15:16; 1Pe.2:5. (4) “παραδέχομαι, *accept, receive*” Heb.12:6. (5) “προσλαμβάνω *receive or accept in one's society, in (to) one's home or circle of acquaintances* τινά *someone* of one Christian receiving another Rom.14:1; 15:7a. Of God or Christ accepting the believer 14:3; 15:7b”. (6) “πρόσληψις or πρόσληψις *acceptance* (by God) Ro 11:15.” All quotations are from *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, BAG.

Important as accepting God may be, even more important is our being accepted by God. This would be utterly impossible without the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, where he died to reconcile us to God. His death for our sake was necessary to open the way for God to accept us. If God does not accept us, of what use is it for us to accept Him? His accepting us is an act of His bountiful grace; our accepting Him is an act of the grateful obedience of faith in response to His grace.

Even when we say that we “accept Him,” there is the question as to what we mean by that. It is still up to God to decide whether our accepting Him is even acceptable to Him. We must not fall into a false assurance that leads us to believe that we are saved just because we have accepted Him without bothering to ascertain whether our accepting Him is acceptable to Him.

As for Jesus, only when we receive him as Lord of our lives will our acceptance of him begin to be acceptable to him. Why do we say “begin” to be acceptable? It is because, as we saw in Colossians 2:6, we must “continue to live in him” as our Lord. If our lives don’t match what we profess, we won’t be acceptable to him.

Surely we are not so deluded as to think that we can fool God into accepting us on the basis of a mere profession of faith, or on the basis of a way of life that only partially matches our profession of Him as Lord. Many of the references given in the previous footnote refer to things which Christians should do which are acceptable to God.

## **The sacrificial system provided a way to be acceptable to God**

The fundamental question is not whether we accept God but whether God accepts us. We must grasp this point if we are to understand the sacrificial system at all. The whole purpose of the sacrifices is to provide a means for sinners to become acceptable to God. If we reverse the picture and make everything depend on our accepting God, then it will remain a mystery to us as to why Jesus had to die.

### **Full-time service also requires God's acceptance**

Before we examine the sacrificial system, let me point out that this important truth—that everything fundamentally depends on God's acceptance—applies to *every area of the Christian life*. It applies not only to our salvation but also our full-time service for the Lord. We tend to think that it is we who decide whether to serve God full-time or not. I seldom hear people say it is a question of whether God accepts them for full-time service. Some people think it is up to them to decide whether to serve God or not, and some even think that our full-time service is a favor to God. In contrast to this, what we see in Scripture are men of outstanding quality who hope that God may consider them worthy of His service.

God looks into the hearts of those who aspire to serve Him. He observes the way they live and do things, such as the way they use money or the way they fulfill the responsibilities entrusted to them (Lk.16:9,10; cf. 19:17).

Those who are faithful in one area will serve with the same faithfulness in another area. Observations are also made of those who are unfaithful. But God doesn't choose us just because we think we are faithful, for He knows us better than we know ourselves.

The reverse can also happen: we consider ourselves unworthy, but God's evaluation is different, for His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8,9).

When Isaiah, a prophet of high spiritual stature, was called to serve God, he immediately became painfully aware of his unworthiness. He did not say, "Here I am, Lord, ready to serve you." Instead of saying anything like that, he had a deep realization of his unworthy spiritual condition. In the presence of the living God he saw his wretched state and cried out, "*Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips*" (Isa.6:5). How can a man of unclean lips be acceptable to God as His spokesman? God had to cleanse Isaiah, widely regarded as the greatest of the prophets, before he could be accepted for God's service. Are there not many in the church today who preach with lips that have not been cleansed, causing turmoil, dissension, and even schism in the churches?

In the spiritual life, we don't call the tunes, and we are not the boss. Let us not be ensnared in the ancient Greek idea that man is the measure of all things. In Scripture, it is God, not man, who is the measure of all things. He is the One who determines everything. From Him proceeds everything that pertains to life. "*For with You is the fountain*



*of life*” (Psalm 36:9). God is the One who decides whether we will be accepted into His kingdom, or into His service.

## **Accepted through Jesus' sacrificial blood**

The sacrificial system was instituted so that Israel could approach God, but from a distance. They could not come near. It allowed only one person—the high priest—to enter into God's presence, and that only once a year. Not even the high priest could come into God's presence without the shedding of sacrificial blood to atone for his own sins. He could not—dared not—go through the veil into the Holy of Holies without the blood. The people of Israel would stay at a distance, even on the Day of Atonement, despite their many sacrifices. No one dared come into God's presence; only the high priest could enter, and only through the shed blood.

The fundamental principle in Scripture is not whether we accept God but whether God accepts us. Without the blood of the sacrifice, it would be impossible for sinful man to draw near to Him. This was true in the past, and remains true in the present and the future. Jesus died in order to make us acceptable to God because we could never, with our sins, be acceptable to Him.

## **Being perfect is a basic requirement**

There is another vital truth. Since it is God who decides whether we are acceptable to Him, what kind of person is acceptable to God? The answer is found in our present topic:

*perfection*. The only kind of person that God accepts is *the perfect man*. God accepts nothing less than perfection! We need to elaborate on this astonishing principle from God's word.

Perfection in the Biblical sense is not, in fact, the highest ideal that we suppose it to be. Perfection is but a *basic* requirement that is commanded of every Christian. "You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt.5:48). As we have seen, this means to be holy as He is holy. God required Israel to be holy; otherwise they would not be accepted. The same applies to us. Hebrews 12:14 states plainly, "*Make every effort to be holy; without holiness no one will see God.*" Not allowed to see God? What can that mean but that the person is rejected by God?

### **Three aspects of the sacrificial system: all three call for perfection**

Let us consider three main aspects of the sacrificial system. First, there is the sacrifice. Second, there is the priest who offers the sacrifice. Third, there is the sinner on whose behalf the priest offers the sacrifice. There is, of course, a fourth party—God—who accepts (or rejects) the sacrifices. But here we are discussing the subject from the human perspective, and examine these three things: the sacrifice, the priest, and the sinner.

## 1. The sacrifice must be perfect: without any defect

*The sacrifice.* In the Law, no sacrifice is acceptable unless it is perfect, that is, without spot or blemish or defect. Every sacrifice that we offer to God has to be perfect before it can be accepted. This requirement is stated in many passages. Some examples:

Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer, for it will not be acceptable for you. And when a man offers a sacrifice of peace offerings to Yahweh ... it must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it. (Leviticus 22:20-21)

... the first-born of your flock ... if it has any defect ... you shall not sacrifice it to Yahweh your God (Deut.15:19,21).

You shall not sacrifice to Yahweh your God an ox or a sheep which has a blemish or any defect, for that is a detestable thing to Yahweh your God (Deut.17:1).

It is stated clearly and repeatedly that a sacrifice has to be perfect before Yahweh God will accept it. It can have no blemish at all, not a single flaw. The sacrifice that we offer to God will be rejected if it has the slightest imperfection.

In the sacrificial system, when an animal is brought to the temple as an offering to God, the priest inspects it for flaws. If it has even one imperfection, the priest will say, "Take it away. It is unacceptable to God." This is designed to teach Israel that only the best and the perfect are acceptable to Yahweh. The Israelites shall offer to God only what is flawless and without blemish (Exod.12:5; Lev.1:3,10; Ezek. 43:22-25; 45:18,23; 46:6,13).

The Israelites were taught this lesson day after day, yet it seems that Christians still don't get it despite having the Old Testament in their Bibles. Do we think that perfection is required before God under the Old Covenant, but anything goes under the New Covenant? What sort of concept of God or the New Covenant do we have?

Some Christians offer a bit of their spare time to God, but the fact is that we are the Lord's, having been bought by him with a price (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23)—namely, the life blood of Jesus—so we ought to live for him full-time.

Many Christians don't even give tithes to the Lord (cf. Malachi 3:8,9). Or if they do, they think they have done a great service for the Lord who supposedly pleads at the door of our hearts. If you give something to a beggar, you are being kind to him, aren't you? Of course no one would dare call God a beggar since that would come close to blasphemy. But is that not how He is sometimes treated? We could be guilty of blasphemy, not by what we say but what we do.

In the history of Israel, during the times when their relationship with God grew more tenuous and remote, their spiritual lives began to decline, even to the point that the priests "despised" Yahweh. If the priests could do this, what could one expect of the nation as a whole?

"If I am a Master, where is My respect?" says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, "How have we despised your name?" You are presenting defiled food upon My altar ... But when you present the

blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? (Malachi 1:6-8, cf. also v.13)

People don't normally give good things to a beggar, but here God was being treated as a beggar by the ungodly priests who gave Him the animals no one else wanted. What kind of insolence towards God had they descended to? Little wonder that not only their sacrifices but the nation as a whole was rejected by God, and the people were sent into exile.

If you plan to offer God something that is less than perfect, you might as well not bother at all; it will surely be rejected. God may even regard such an offering as evil, as Malachi makes clear. Will we continue to think that if our lives are less than holy or perfect, we will still be acceptable to God?

Both Israelites and Christians ought to have known that only unblemished offerings are acceptable to God, for that was already true long before the sacrificial system was instituted. As early as in Genesis 4, when Cain and Abel made their respective offerings, God rejected Cain's offering. He explained to Cain that if he had "done well," his offering would have been accepted (4:7). Abel, on the other hand, did well, offering his best, and his sacrifice was accepted.

## **2. The priest must be perfect**

*The priest.* It is not only the sacrifice but also the priest that has to be perfect before he could be accepted into God's

service. This is stated in Leviticus 21, in which God said to Moses:

Speak to Aaron [the high priest], saying, none of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long ... No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's food offering; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of God (Leviticus 21:17,18,21, ESV).

No one with the slightest imperfection may offer sacrifices to God. Both the sacrifice and the priest must be perfect. God was not, of course, primarily concerned with *physical* flawlessness. All this was designed to drive home the lesson that nothing less than spiritual excellence and perfection is acceptable to God. Every priest had to be thoroughly inspected before he could be accepted into God's service. He was not exempted from inspection despite his priestly descent.

That priests have to be without blemish to be acceptable to God connects to what we said earlier regarding full-time church workers, since priests are like "full-time workers" in the temple ministry.

Aaron was the high priest, yet none of his descendants would be accepted for the priestly ministry if they had any defect. Being of priestly descent, and belonging to the tribe that God had appointed for the priestly service, did not

automatically qualify the priests to serve in the temple. Even a man of priestly birth must be inspected to verify that he is perfect and without blemish.

Why then do so many evangelists and preachers paint a pitiful picture of a beggarly Lord standing at the door of our hearts, hoping that we might open the door out of compassion for Him? We have turned everything upside down. The truth is that no one except the perfect will be accepted into God's holy and majestic presence.

Brothers and sisters, perfection in Scripture is not a high and lofty ideal that is unattainable in this life. We are talking about something that God expects of everyone, a perfection without which we would be rejected.

### **3. The sacrifice perfects us, freeing us from the guilt and the power of sin**

*The sinner.* The third point concerns the sinner on whose behalf the sacrifice is offered. The purpose of the sacrifice is to make the person who offers it acceptable to God, by making him perfect. And what do we mean by "perfect"? The book of Hebrews gives us a definition of "perfect" that is particularly relevant because it is used in the context of the sacrificial system.

Hebrews first points out that "the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year ... make perfect those who draw near" (10:1; also 7:11).

If the purpose of the sacrifices was not to make perfect those for whom the sacrifices were offered, then this statement would be irrelevant. The whole point hinges on the truth that *the sacrifices were offered in order to make sinners perfect.*

But the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant could not accomplish this because it was “a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience” (9:9), that is, the sacrifices cannot free him from the guilt of sin in his heart because they can’t free him from the *power* of sin. As explained in Romans 7, he does the evil he doesn’t want to do, and is unable to do the good he wants to do. Though he may repeat the sacrifice offerings, he is not any better off than before because he keeps on sinning. “O wretched man that I am” (Rom.7:24) expresses that the worshiper is not “perfect in conscience,” being under sin’s unrelenting dominion.

*Perfection, therefore, means freedom from the guilt of sin and the power of sin.* Anyone who has been freed from sin in both senses—the guilt and the power—is thereby perfected. If you have been freed from the power of sin and are no longer enslaved to it, and if your past sins have been forgiven by the sacrifice, then your spiritual state is one of perfection. If you are no longer compelled to sin, you are clearly free from its power. You are able to live a life that is holy and righteous, pleasing and acceptable to God.



The sacrifices were offered in the temple to remove the guilt of sin that grips the conscience. "I have sinned! What shall I do?" Those in bondage to sin are constantly paralyzed by a guilty conscience.

In an earlier chapter, we saw that it is not enough to be freed from the guilt of sin. Even if a drug addict is pardoned, that does not solve his root problem, because he is still under the powerful control of his addiction to drugs. To forgive him his sins without freeing him from the power of sin is not true mercy, because he will keep on returning to drugs, thus increasing his sin and his guilt.

For the sacrifice to be effective, it must remove the guilt of sin, *and free the person from the power of sin*. We cannot be perfect in this sacrificial sense unless we are free on both counts. To preach a forgiveness of sins without a corresponding freedom from the tyrannical power of sin is not the good news of the gospel at all.

Does the drug addict truly rejoice if he is told that he is pardoned when he is still in the grip of his addiction? If his addiction compels him to jab dirty needles into his veins, where is the good news? He is still enslaved to drugs. There is no gospel or good news to talk about unless we preach *freedom from both the guilt and the power of sin*, which is perfection.

This explains why the Old Testament sacrifices had to be replaced by the sacrifice of Christ. If the Law could have imparted life and freedom, then the Law would have been sufficient, and Christ's death wouldn't have been necessary.

But in reality, the Law cannot free us from the power of sin. Hence neither can it ultimately free us from the guilt of sin. He who is still under the control of sin will continue to sin and increase his guilt.

Hebrews 7:19 says that the “Law made nothing perfect”. For this reason, “the former regulation (the Law) is set aside because it was weak and useless” (v.18, NIV).

The description “weak and useless” indicates that the temple sacrifices were ultimately unable to deal with the problem of sin’s power. Hence the law made nothing perfect. But a better hope has arrived by which we can draw near to God by being made acceptable to Him. This is the Good News: “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all ... because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Hebrews 10:10,14).

## **Jesus Christ as sacrifice, high priest, and offering**

The three aforementioned points regarding the sacrificial system can be applied to the Lord Jesus himself: (i) Christ is the perfect sacrifice; (ii) Christ is the perfect high priest; (iii) the offering of Christ perfects the sinner.

### **(1) Jesus, the perfect sacrifice**

Firstly, Jesus has to be perfect, for he cannot otherwise be offered up as a sacrifice for us. This is seen in 1Peter 1:18-19:

It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (NIV)

## (2) Jesus, the perfect high priest

Secondly, in line with the Old Testament requirements, Jesus had to be perfect *as a high priest*. Because he is both priest and sacrifice, he had to be perfect on both counts, or else his sacrifice would not avail for us.

The Old Testament's stress on perfection is designed to teach us *spiritual* perfection. When Peter (in the passage quoted) describes Jesus as a lamb without blemish, he is not referring to physical flawlessness but to spiritual perfection. Jesus was without sin (blemishes represent sin), so God accepted him on our behalf. But contrary to what we might have expected, Jesus, even as the Son of God on earth, was not born spiritually perfect. He had to be *made perfect*:

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God ... should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering ... And, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. (Hebrews 2:10; 5:9)

### **(3) Perfected by the offering of Christ, freed from sin's guilt and power**

Thirdly, Christ is both the perfect priest and perfect sacrifice. But was the death which he died something that was done *for himself*? No, he died for you and me, to perfect us. Hebrews 10:14 says that by a single offering, Christ “has perfected for all time those who are sanctified”.

To be perfected—set free from the guilt and the power of sin—results in a profound change. The sinner becomes righteous. He is transformed into a new person in Christ.

To be perfected is not a hypothetical ideal but something we can experience in our daily life. To be absolved of guilt is something to give thanks for. But unless we are also free from the *power of sin*, our guilt will soon return. If the death of Christ only frees us from the guilt but not the power of sin, then it is really no different from the Old Testament sacrifices. As Hebrews tells us, those sacrifices had to be replaced precisely for that reason. Otherwise, the sinner, like the drug addict, though he is offered a pardon, is still caught in the vice-like grip of sin.

Hence God would not justify us from sin solely in the sense of declaring us forgiven and righteous without also liberating us from the tyranny of sin and making us new persons “created ... in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph.4:24).

In other words, in the New Testament, justification by faith cannot be narrowly defined as “declared righteous” but must include “made righteous”. Freedom from the guilt of

sin corresponds to “declared righteous,” freedom from the power of sin corresponds to “made righteous”. “If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). Are we living in this freedom?

We might call ourselves Christians or have been baptized, but the key question is: Does God accept us? He will accept us, but only if we receive the sacrifice of Christ in such a way that it is efficacious in our lives, freeing us from sin's guilt and power.

This precious truth is expounded in Romans chapters 6 and 8. Freedom from sin's oppression is given to every true disciple of Christ as his spiritual birthright and heritage. The law of sin and death formerly held us in bondage, but now the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus enables us to live in freedom.

## **Freedom and assurance**

If this freedom is not a reality in us, in what sense has Christ's sacrifice perfected us? If we have not been perfected, how can we be accepted by God? We may accept Him, but does He accept us? We will have the assurance of His acceptance only if we experience in us the perfecting power of the sacrifice of Christ. In practice it means that our lives are being “led by the Spirit of God”—the Spirit who “bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:14,16). Herein lies the true assurance of our hearts.

Do we pursue money as the main motivation of our lives? Do we habitually harbor a critical attitude towards people, picking on their every fault? Do we see the splinter in their eyes but not the log in ours? All in all, have we been freed from the law of sin and death, and are experiencing the new life?

The Lord Jesus in his boundless love welcomes us. His outstretched arms at the cross showed his desire to accept us sinners. If we fail to come within his embrace, it won't be because he was unwilling but because we were unwilling.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:7)

For God has accepted him. (Romans 14:3)

## Chapter 16



# THE MEANING OF “PERFECT” IN HEBREWS

## Perfection is central to Hebrews



In this chapter we aim to bring out the essence of the letter to the Hebrews by focusing on a central theme in it: *perfection*.

Hebrews is a mysterious book to many Christians because it deals with a topic that is obscure to them: *the Old Testament sacrificial system*. It is important, however, that we grasp the message of Hebrews or else the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament will remain opaque and obscure to us. In fact, Hebrews sums up for us the spiritual essence of the Old Testament. It is a key to understanding the Pentateuch in particular, and the Old Testament in general.

In the necessarily concise exposition of Hebrews in this chapter, we will consider a key to understanding Hebrews

itself. It is found in the word “perfect” or “make perfect”. Another word that is related to “perfect” in Hebrews is the word “holy” or “make holy” (often translated “sanctify”) in its various forms. But in the scope of this chapter, we can only consider “perfect”.

How central is the idea of “perfect” in the book of Hebrews? In the original Greek text, the verb occurs 9 times in Hebrews versus 14 times in all the rest of the New Testament. Hence Hebrews accounts for almost half the New Testament occurrences of “perfect” in the verb form. When cognate (related) forms are taken into account, perfection is mentioned 14 times in Hebrews. These statistics make it evident that perfection is central to the book of Hebrews.

What then does “perfect” mean in Hebrews? We must not arbitrarily impose our own definitions upon a word in Scripture; we need to establish what the word means in Scriptural usage. It is not just a matter of looking up “perfect” in a standard dictionary such as *Oxford English Dictionary* and then importing its definition into Hebrews, because that definition might not express the meaning intended by its author. What the writer himself means by “perfect” needs to be established by examining how he himself uses the word. The task is made easier by the fact that “perfect” in its various forms appears many times in Hebrews. If the word had occurred only once or twice, we may feel obliged to resort to guesswork, but when it occurs 14 times, the guessing can be eliminated.



## The Old Testament sacrifices did not make anyone perfect

Hebrews is concerned with the Old Testament sacrificial system and the priestly system associated with it. Hence, in Hebrews, “perfect” is used in the context of the law, the sacrifices, and the priesthood. To narrow our field, let us start with Hebrews 10, and then widen our field from there. In chapter 10, “perfect” occurs twice in the first 14 verses. Verse 1 says:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, **make perfect** those who draw near to worship. (Hebrews 10:1, NIV)

The sacrificial system made no one perfect, not even those who sincerely tried to draw near to God. The sacrifices that a man offered, even if done regularly and frequently, could not make him perfect. The sacrifices had to do with atonement<sup>38</sup> for sin. Since the sacrifices could not “make perfect those who draw near to worship,” those who drew near were unable to enter into communion with God. Only

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<sup>38</sup> See for example Leviticus 1.4; 4.20; 5.6; 6.7; 9.7 etc. “Atonement” in all these references translates the Hebrew *kapar* (כפר), which occurs 44 times in Leviticus and 121 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Therefore more than one third of all the occurrences of *kapar* in the OT are in Leviticus, with 13 in Leviticus chapter 16 alone. In Numbers, it occurs 17 times.

through the sacrifice of Christ do we have access to God, and dare enter into the Holiest Place to draw near to Him.

The Old Testament sacrifices—many though they were, and a complex system though they formed—could not perfect the worshippers, whereas “by a single offering Jesus has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (v.14).

### **Perfect: Free from sin**

The meaning of perfect emerges when we survey Hebrews 10. Verse 1 says that the Law “can never ... make perfect those who draw near.” Note the strong word “never”. The sacrifices, which are central to the Law and the Old Testament way of life, were unable to perfect anyone no matter how often or faithfully they were offered. Nor were they designed for that purpose, being only a “shadow” pointing to the “good things” (10:1) that God has in store for those who have faith in Him. In God’s plan of salvation, the Law served an important didactic purpose: It was “our tutor to lead us to Christ” (Gal.3:24).

But once the Law had fulfilled that crucial role and achieved its God-given purpose of leading us to Christ, its task was completed. Because we have come to Christ and are justified by faith in him, having learned from this “tutor” (the Law) the necessity of his death for our salvation, we remain deeply thankful for the tutor even if his services as “schoolmaster” are required no more (Gal.3:25).

As a shadow of the good things, the sacrifices pointed forward to the true and effectual sacrifice that was to be made for us in Christ. The sacrifices were therefore *promissory* in character, so that those who offered them could be “saved in hope” just as we are (Rom.8:24). The fact that the sacrifices could never perfect anyone, even when repeated, should have made its promissory character evident to the spiritually discerning. Perfecting the sinner had never been God’s purpose for these sacrifices; hence they could never bring anyone to perfection.

If the sacrifices could perfect sinners, “would they not have ceased to be offered?” (Heb.10:2a). Obviously, if the sacrifices could perfect you, you wouldn’t have to offer them again. In this hypothetical situation, “the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had *consciousness of sin.*” (v.2b).

To be made “perfect” (10:1) means to be “cleansed” from sin (10:2); if we have been cleansed—perfected—we wouldn’t have to offer the sacrifices again. But because they could not cleanse us, the people had to keep on offering the sacrifices under the Old Testament.

Verse 3 says, “*In these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year.*” Far from cleansing the people from sin, the sacrifices reminded them of sin. The continual consciousness of sin and guilt arises from the inability of the sacrifices to cleanse the sinner.

Verse 4 says, “*For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.*” The sacrifices were made

repeatedly precisely because it was “impossible” for them to remove sins.

So far we have seen three parallel concepts: *perfect* means *cleansed*, which in turn means the *removal of sin*. Hence perfection has to do with the removal of sin. But sanctified—made holy—also means to be cleansed from sin. “Jesus also, that he might sanctify (‘make holy’, NIV) the people through his own blood, suffered outside the city gate” (Heb.13:12). “By this will (of God, v.9) we have been sanctified (made holy) through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb.10:10). “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb.10:14). Here we see the intrinsic link between “perfected” and “sanctified,”<sup>39</sup> or “made holy”.

When we are sanctified, we can draw near to God and commune with Him. Having been sanctified, every Christian is a *saint* (Rom.1:7; 1Cor.1:2; etc.). The Greek

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<sup>39</sup> In Paul’s letters, “sanctified” and “sanctification” are used in essentially the same way as in Hebrews. 1Corinthians 6:11 says, “But you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”. Here “sanctified” stands after “washed” but before “justified,” indicating its link to the cleansing from sin through Jesus’ blood. In 1Cor.1:30, “sanctification” is mentioned *before* “redemption”. It is through this sanctification that salvation is attained (2Th.2:13). We are sanctified “by the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God” to “cleanse” us, that we may “serve the living God” (Heb. 9:13,14). Sanctification is essential to salvation because “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb.12:14).

words for *saint* and *sanctify* (*hagios*, ἅγιος and *hagiazō*, ἁγιάζω) share a common root. A saint is simply one who has been sanctified, cleansed from sin—*perfected*. When sin has been removed, one is no longer oppressively conscious of sin or burdened with a sense of guilt. It is now clear that in the book of Hebrews, *perfection means freedom from sin*.

### **Jesus made perfect through suffering**

Interestingly, the definition of perfection given in Hebrews, namely, *freedom from sin*, applies in a specific sense even to the Lord himself. How is this possible in view of the fact that Jesus has never sinned? The answer is found in Hebrews chapter 2.

In this chapter, it is said that Jesus was made “*perfect ... through suffering*” (v.10). This included the suffering of temptation: “*He himself was tempted in that which he has suffered*” (v.18). Because he shared our nature of “flesh and blood” (v.14), he was subjected to the same temptations and pressures of sin as we are, yet he triumphed consistently over sin, and remained free from sin. He established his freedom from sin through his costly yet decisive victory over it.

A comparison with Adam can help us understand this point more clearly. Adam began life in the Garden without sin, but when faced with the temptation to disobey God, rather than being willing to endure whatever suffering was needed to remain faithful to God and not succumb to the

temptation, he yielded to temptation, disobeyed God, and lost his freedom from sin.

If he had obeyed God in the face of temptation, he would have been “made perfect” through obedience and would have remained free from sin. He was initially perfect in the general sense of being free from sin by virtue of not having sinned yet; but he would have been “made perfect” in the deeper sense (the true meaning of Biblical perfection) if he had triumphed over sin. Jesus was victorious where Adam failed.

Having won that victory, Jesus can set us free from sin. A slave of sin cannot overcome sin because a slave has no authority over his master. But when Jesus sets us free from the bondage to sin, we can triumph over sin as he did. He was tempted in every way, yet he never sinned (Heb.4:15). He triumphed against the fiercest assaults which sin and the powers of darkness could launch against him.

## **Freedom from sin**

“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). This refers specifically to *freedom from sin* because just two verses earlier Jesus said, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin”. There is no true freedom apart from the freedom from sin.

Let us take the case of a drug addict who lives in Canada. He may be free as far as the law is concerned if he hasn't yet been prosecuted and charged. He enjoys all the rights of a

citizen. He may be free from financial burdens. He is free in every *legal* sense of the word “free”. But so long as he is not free from sin or his drug addiction, he is not “free indeed,” and does not enjoy true freedom.

You may be financially free because you have an adequate bank account. You might not be a millionaire, but you’re not going to be evicted from your apartment over unpaid rent. You may be free from any crippling disease, and free because your rights are protected by the Constitution. But if you are a slave of sin, being controlled by any form of addiction such as greed or lust, you are not truly free.

Only “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Freedom from sin is the only true freedom. Jesus goes on to say, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). The truth in Christ sets us free. When Scripture speaks of freedom, it does not refer to political or financial freedom but to spiritual freedom—*freedom from sin*—without which no other freedom has any substantive meaning.

## **Two dangers relating to freedom from sin**

Here we must tackle two dangerous ideas pertaining to freedom from sin. If we err in either point, there will be grave consequences. The first danger is to think that we are free when we are not. The second danger is to misuse a freedom that we really do possess. Scripture deals with both dangers.

## **First danger: Thinking you are free when you are not**

### **(1) The consciousness of sin**

If a sacrifice truly sets a person free from sin, he “would no longer have consciousness of sin” (Hebrews 10:2). The consciousness of sin remained under the Old Testament system, but not so in Christ, for “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (v.14), and frees us from the consciousness of sin.

But we need to be careful in how we understand “consciousness of sin”. Does the term imply that becoming a Christian is a *psychological* matter, by which you no longer feel a sense of guilt because you now believe that Jesus died for you? Is the main benefit of Christianity something of a psychological nature that removes a feeling of guilt that is bad for our mental health? Does Christianity remove psychological burdens, guilt complexes and the like, leading to the conclusion that Jesus died mainly to heal us on the “inner” or psychological level?

### **(2) The danger of self-deception**

We will not venture into the subject of psychiatry or psychology. Yet many have fallen for a dangerous self-deception: Whether you “feel” forgiven is one thing; whether you have truly been freed from sin is another. The point is simple: If you are still under the power of sin yet



don't feel any guilt, then you are in a dangerous self-deception because you are enslaved to sin without your realizing it. You have taken spiritual opiate. Karl Marx's accusation, that religion is the opiate of the people, can under these circumstances be correct.

As Marx would put it, religion makes people feel good even if nothing has changed in their true situation. Religion gives people the hope of going to heaven even while they are living in poverty and are being exploited by landlords and capitalists. They feel good because they take opium (religion) and forget their true situation. The oppressors grow stronger while the wretched people remain addicted to the opiate of religion. Marx could be right up to a point.

We too could become spiritual drug pushers who peddle opium to a people languishing in spiritual wretchedness. It is like giving a shot of morphine to a wounded soldier. The injection will ease the pain but is he really any better? He may *feel* better, but his actual condition is still the same; he will bleed to death if the wound is not speedily treated.

In preaching God's word, we must not fall into self-delusion or peddle spiritual opiate. Let no one live in self-delusion, for it is bondage of the worst kind. Self-delusion is to think we are free from sin on the basis of some Christian doctrine when in fact we are still enslaved to sin—for example, a doctrine that declares that you are forgiven simply by accepting God's forgiveness. That sounds good. “Believe that you have been forgiven, and you are forgiven.” But please tell me what to do about the sin that enslaves me,

and the debt of sin that is piling up. So I plead for forgiveness every day: “Lord, I’m sorry that I failed You yesterday, today and probably tomorrow.” Is this the Christian life?

You might even go one step further: After asking for forgiveness, you try your best to lose all consciousness of sin. Even if you are still controlled by sin, just take it easy. Don’t talk about sin, don’t think about it, don’t worry about it, because the blood of Jesus has cleansed you in the past, and will continue to cleanse you after.

### **(3) No need to be concerned about your sins?**

Don’t worry about sin, we are told, not even if sin is eating you up like a cancer ravaging the body. “No matter how often you sin, no matter how wretched your spiritual state is, there is forgiveness. You may be living in spiritual bankruptcy and piling up debt, but it has all been written off. Even if you accumulate debt for the rest of your life, Jesus’ infinite account will be there to write them off!”

Isn’t there something wrong here? Can we pile up debt forever just because we think that God will forgive them? Do you see the mortal danger of this kind of thinking which leads to carelessness about sin?

Some Christians want to forget about sin because it is tiring to plead for forgiveness again and again, apologizing to the Lord day in and day out. Shouldn’t this come to an end? Wouldn’t God be tired of listening to our endless apologies? In what way does our repeated plea for forgiveness differ from the repeated sacrifices under the Law?

#### **(4) Is Romans 7 a picture of the Christian life?**

Many Christians have not crossed over from the bondage to sin described in Romans 7 to the freedom from sin, available in Christ, described in Romans 8. Some even say that Romans 7 describes the *Christian* life! If that were true, the “Christian” life of Romans 7 would be a flat contradiction of what is expounded in Romans 6 and 8. A careful reading of Romans 7 makes it clear that it speaks of the *failure to live the spiritual life*, one which can hardly be labelled as “Christian”. Sadly, many Christians identify with the description in Romans 7, taking it as a stark portrayal of their own failed “Christian” lives.

Our failures must be examined in the light of Scripture, and our lives must conform to what Scripture describes as being “in Christ”. A Christian is “in Christ” when he has been “baptized into Christ ... into his death” (Rom.6:3). In Christ, he has died to sin, for “how shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (6:2). Living in the grip of sin is the situation described in Romans 7. Paul speaks of having “died to sin” not merely in some legal or ceremonial sense, but as a practical matter of daily living, which is his concern throughout chapter 6.

But many Christians did not die with Christ at their baptism. They did not die to sin, and consequently have never experienced the truth of Romans 6:7: “He who has died is freed from sin”. Still living under the power of sin, they are caught in the destructive cycle of sin and guilt. They seek psychological release from the guilt which hounds them

relentlessly. But seeking a feeling of forgiveness when we are still controlled by the power of sin is self-deception.

**(5) The consciousness of sin: psychological or spiritual?**

When Hebrews 10:2 says that the “consciousness” of sin is removed through Jesus’ sacrifice, is it referring to something purely psychological? If being a Christian is to have a psychological feeling of forgiveness, wouldn’t the Old Testament sacrifices be equally effective? As far as psychological benefits are concerned, there is nothing defective about the Old Testament sacrifices. Would not the blood of bulls and goats be sufficient? When I see the animal being sacrificed on my behalf, I trust that Yahweh God accepts the offering because He Himself instituted the sacrificial system. I confessed my sins, the animal has been sacrificed, and therefore I am forgiven. There is no obvious reason why the Old Testament sacrifices are not effective psychologically.

I am not aware of any statements in Jewish writings to the effect that the Old Testament sacrifices were unable to remove their guilt feelings. I have not encountered any such statement in the rabbinical and Jewish literature I have read. The animal sacrifices do appear to provide psychological release from a sense of guilt to those who offer them.

The writer to the Hebrews is, however, dealing with spiritual reality rather than psychology. His basic point is that the Old Testament sacrifices did not avail because they could not free anyone from the power of sin. The guilt returns when sins are committed, and the offering of

sacrifices is needed again. In this cycle of sin and guilt, alternating with sacrifices, there is psychological relief, but not for long because there is no true freedom from sin.

Visiting a psychologist may provide some mental relief. He or she may suggest a holiday on a Caribbean island, and who wouldn't feel better after that? On the purely psychological level, a holiday can do as much for you as going to church.

By contrast, we think that the Lord Jesus makes life difficult for us when he says that you cannot be his disciple without denying yourself. Deny yourself? That requirement alone is enough to kill off all good feelings! It is bad psychology, you might say. And you are right because Jesus does not preach psychology.

### **(6) A psychological gospel cannot save us**

A psychological pain killer to ease the pain of guilt and comfort the vexed heart is found in every religion. All religions have something to offer on the psychological level that attracts people.

The Old Testament sacrifices have a real psychological value. But when Hebrews speaks of the removal of the consciousness of sin through Christ's sacrifice for us, it is referring to something more than psychology, namely, *the spiritual experience of deliverance from sin*. If we have been freed from sin and its power, we are no longer conscious of sin as an ever-present entity controlling our lives and making us do what it wants us to do.

If you say to a drug addict, “Drugs are bad for you, but don’t you worry about it because everyone is taking drugs nowadays,” you are ministering to him psychologically while he is still controlled by drugs. Notwithstanding your assurances, he is aware that drugs are destroying his health and finances.

The gospel of psychology fails in the same way: You tell the sinner, “Everything’s fine because Jesus has forgiven your sins,” yet he feels that something is amiss. Then you explain to him, “Your problem is a lack of faith. Claim the free gift of forgiveness even if you are still enslaved to sin. Who’s perfect anyway?”

What are we telling the sinner? Ignore sin even if it enslaves him? He will soon discover that no matter how often he takes hold of God’s forgiveness, the power of sin will compel him to sin again and again. He begs for forgiveness all the time, and knows that something is wrong, yet he is being told that it is a problem of his faith. Quack doctors are giving him the wrong diagnosis and the wrong medication. It is like giving symptomatic treatment to a critically ill person, “Just take this pain killer, and everything’s going to be fine.”

Let God search our hearts and reveal to us whether the sacrifice of Jesus and the power of his blood have freed us from the power of sin. If we feel good on the psychological level while still living under sin’s dominion, then we are in a state of spiritual paralysis or self-delusion, or both, and are dead in “trespasses and sins” (Eph.2:1).

If we are controlled by sin, it would be better for us to *feel bad*. Then we will say to the Lord, “Please free me from bondage.” I recently read a book by a medical specialist who said that where there is pain, there is life and the hope of recovery. But when an affected area is dead, the pain is felt no more. May the pain of being afflicted by sin still be felt in us and drive us to the Savior.

If you are truly free from sin (or from the addiction to drugs), you won’t need anyone to tell you to feel free. The psychological will follow the actual without the use of gimmicks.

### **(7) The light view and the serious view of sin**

There is a light view of sin, and there is a serious view. The light view is to think we can continue to sin because Christ has paid the penalty. This view is deadly because it destroys our sensitivity to sin and quenches our conscience with a dose of religion. The light view of sin is often seen in the psychological presentation of the gospel.

The other is the serious view of sin. If God didn’t take a serious view of sin, would it have been necessary for Christ to die for our sins? God “did not spare His own Son, but delivered him up for us all” (Rom.8:32). Paul teaches the serious view of sin: “If God did not spare the natural branches [the unbelieving Jews who persisted in disobeying God], neither will He spare you” (Rom.11:21). God is gracious and kind, but also holy and just. “Continue in His kindness otherwise you also will be cut off” (Rom.11:22).

The Lord Jesus himself takes a very serious view of sin, especially for his disciples. Consider these striking words:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”  
(Matthew 5:29)

These words are addressed to his disciples and the crowds gathered around him (Mt.5:1). If there were no danger of being cast into hell for a disciple who sins, how would this statement apply to them? If it has little relevance, why would the rest of the Sermon on the Mount be relevant to them? Paul warns the Galatian Christians:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.  
(Galatians 6:7-8, ESV)

Gouging out the eye is to be taken spiritually, not literally. In the history of the church no one has been known to literally pluck out an eye. In any case, this would not solve the problem of sin because, as Jesus says in the previous verse, sin is a problem which has its center in man's *heart* (Mt.5:28). Gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand (v.30) will not get at the root of the problem. The eye looks at what the heart desires, and the hand follows what the heart dictates. Jesus is saying that drastic action is called for when



our entry into eternal life is at risk. His serious view of sin is seen in another passage:

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (Matthew 18:89-9, NIV; cf. Mark 9:43-48)

To whom does Jesus address these words? Who are the “you” in this statement? The beginning of the chapter shows that *Jesus is speaking to his disciples*, and therefore to us Christians.

Jesus does not teach a light view of sin or a cheap atonement. Anyone who views sin lightly does not realize that the atonement was unimaginably costly to the Lord. Some people have a type of faith that borders on presumption, that grabs things in the name of “faith”. To presume on God’s kindness and forgiveness is the biggest mistake that one could make. “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31).

### **(8) Willful sin versus unwitting sin**

The main word for sin in the Hebrew Old Testament is **חָטָא**, *chata*, which has the basic meaning “to miss the goal” or “to miss the way”.<sup>40</sup> For example, if we fail to live the victorious

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<sup>40</sup> *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* defines *hata* as “miss, miss the way, sin, incur guilt ...” It says further that “the basic meaning

Christian life to which the Lord calls us, we have sinned either by commission or by omission. Either way we have missed the goal, the mark, the calling.

In the Old Testament, sin falls into two main categories: *unwitting sin versus willful sin*. *Unwitting sin* is a sin that is committed unintentionally; a command of God was transgressed without our realizing it. We made a mistake and missed the mark or the standard of conduct which God has set before us.

In the Bible, the only kind of sin that can be forgiven through the sacrifices is *unintentional sin*—sin committed by *mistake*. I stress the word “mistake” because many Christians draw a false distinction between *sin* and *mistake*. If you do something that is wrong and call it a mistake, meaning that it is less than a sin, then you don’t really understand what sin is in the Bible. You have taken a light view of sin, not realizing that a sin by mistake is still a sin.

Many give the excuse that they only made a mistake. That is the human understanding of sin. In Scripture, sin does not necessarily involve a deliberate decision to commit it.

To say that unintentional sin is still a sin committed by mistake is *not* to say, conversely, that every mistake is a sin. If you dialed the wrong number on the telephone, that is a mistake but not a sin; sin is something that affects the *spiritual* life. A mistake on the spiritual level can be unintentional sin, for we did something wrong without realizing

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of the root is to miss a mark or a way.” (R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer Jr, B.K. Waltke, Moody Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1980)

it. We were inconsiderate to someone, or have forgotten to carry out a responsibility entrusted to us. These are sins of omission, often due to carelessness. Carelessness is not a minor matter because it can cause serious incidents with fatal consequences.

Significantly, the word “mistake” or “error” rarely occurs in the Bible, which is not surprising because a mistake is still a sin for which restitution plus a penalty or sacrifice may be required. An example of the first is found in Leviticus 22:14, “If anyone eats a sacred offering by mistake, he must make restitution to the priest for the offering and add a fifth of the value to it”. Other translations have “unwittingly” or “unintentionally” instead of “by mistake”. Another example is seen in Leviticus 4:13-15:

Now if the whole congregation of Israel commits error, and the matter escapes the notice of the assembly, and they commit any of the things which Yahweh has commanded not to be done, and they become guilty; when the sin which they have committed becomes known, then the assembly shall offer a bull of the herd for a sin offering, and bring it before the tent of meeting. Then the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before Yahweh, and the bull shall be slain before Yahweh.

Here the error is regarded as something “committed,” for which the congregation is guilty. It is described as a “sin” even though the people were not aware of the error at first. Consequently, a sin offering had to be made.

## The second danger: to misuse the freedom or the forgiveness that one has

### No forgiveness for intentional sin

In the case of intentional sin, the consequences are extremely serious. If for example you tell a lie deliberately with the purpose of harming someone by misleading him, you are in big trouble because you have sinned intentionally. Scripture gives a frightening warning: *There is no forgiveness for deliberate sin*. Such a sin is unpardonable. That is undoubtedly one reason why the apostle Paul exhorts us to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil.2:12). As a rabbi, Paul thoroughly understood sin in its Biblical meaning. But many people, not knowing this important fact about sin, are baffled by the apostle’s words. In this connection, consider carefully these words of the Law:

But if just one person **sins unintentionally**, he must bring a year-old female goat for a sin offering. The priest is to make atonement before Yahweh for the one **who erred by sinning unintentionally**, and when atonement has been made for him, he will be forgiven. One and the same law applies to everyone who **sins unintentionally**, whether he is a native-born Israelite or an alien. But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes Yahweh, and that person must be cut off from his people. Because he has despised Yahweh’s word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him. (Numbers 15:27-31, NIV)

To sin willfully or intentionally is an act of *defiance* against God. It is to deliberately ignore and reject God’s will defiantly by insisting on doing one’s own will. It is the hubris and arrogance of putting our will above the will of the Most High God. In the Hebrew text, this idea of self-exaltation is found in the words which literally mean “with a high hand,” translated “defiantly” in the text just quoted. RSV and ESV give the literal translation “with a high hand”. It can be said with some justification that deliberate sin is a form of apostasy, for by it the sinner in his arrogance “blasphemes the Lord” (Numbers 15:30).

In the Old Testament the only kind of sin that can be forgiven was unwitting sin. For defiant intentional sin, there was no forgiveness or sacrifice. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies once a year to present an offering of blood “for himself and for the sins of the people committed *in ignorance*” (Hebrews 9:7).

This principle is seen in Hebrews 10:26: “For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” This verse is frightening because it plainly states the seriousness of willful sin. It is addressed not to non-Christians but to Christians (“we”), the covenant people of God who have received the “knowledge of the truth” (cf. “His people,” v.30).

Verse 29 too refers to a Christian when it speaks of one who has profaned “the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified,” one who is, in the light of verse 14, a believer who has been “sanctified” by Christ’s sacrifice. Hebrews

13:12 says that Jesus suffered in order to “*sanctify* the people through his own blood.”

If anyone spurns the blood of the New Covenant after having been sanctified by it, there is no more sacrifice for him. Hebrews brings out this point in the form of a question: What punishment is appropriate in such a case, seeing that the punishment was already severe under the Old Testament for this kind of sin? Hebrews 10:28,29 says:

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant **by which he was sanctified**, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Yet there are some in the church who close their ears to what Scripture teaches so clearly. “This cannot be. It must be a mistake.” A mistake? How our eyes deceive us, and our ears are deaf to plain language. For the sake of our eternal being, let us examine what is written here.

The word “deliberately” or “willingly” (ἐκουσίως, *hekousiōs*) is often used in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) of the freewill offering. This word occurs, for example, in Psalm 54:6 <sup>41</sup>: “With a freewill offering <sup>42</sup> I will sacrifice to

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<sup>41</sup> Psalm 53.8 in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) due to differences in the verse referencing system.

<sup>42</sup> On the “free will” offering, besides the standard Bible dictionaries, reference can be made to the old but still informative work “*Sacrificial Worship of the Old Testament*” by J.H. Kurtz (translated by J. Martin),

You”. The word “freewill” implies that the person is not under any external compulsion or pressure. He chooses to do something willingly, intentionally, and freely.

The same word *hekousiōs* is used in 1Peter 5:2 where Peter exhorts the elders to tend the flock of God “not by constraint but willingly”. Again the contrast between serving *willingly* and *under compulsion*. The leaders are to shepherd the flock voluntarily, freely, gladly.

If a man sins deliberately, he has chosen to sin of his own free will. He was not under any external compulsion to sin. *For such a person there is no more sacrifice.* It will be for our eternal blessing if this truth frightens us enough to shake us out of spiritual complacency.

### **(1) Sinning without external compulsion**

In the Old Testament, if a person sinned deliberately without external compulsion, he was put to death without mercy, *even if he had committed the sin in weakness.*

Let’s take the sin of adultery. Let’s suppose that two persons committed adultery, but without prior plan or arrangement. They didn’t say to one another, “Let’s get together and do this thing.” But one day they found themselves alone and as the hours went by, the mutual attraction grew stronger. In their *weakness* they finally committed adultery without any prior plan, design, or arrangement. Do you think this is pardonable under the Law of Moses? The

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Baker 1980, p.262f.

unequivocal answer is found in Leviticus 20:10, “*The adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death*”—“without mercy” as Hebrews 10:28 puts it. This is consistently the case under the Law.

Weakness was not a legitimate plea under the Old Testament. Do we think it is under the New Testament? It is not. And why not? The answer is simple: We have no excuse for this kind of weakness under the New Testament because God has given us all the grace and power we need through the Holy Spirit to be victorious in every situation. That is the good news of Romans 8.

If the plea of weakness was not accepted under the relatively excusable conditions of the Old Testament (they hadn’t received the Holy Spirit as we have), how much less under the New Testament? In the old system, it was much more difficult to resist temptation (though not impossible, as the case of Joseph shows, Gen.39:10-12) because people didn’t have the Holy Spirit. Frailty of the flesh was a more reasonable plea under the Old Testament, yet it wasn’t accepted. The one who committed adultery, or who murdered in a fit of rage (Lev. 24:17), was liable to the death sentence even if he appealed for mercy on the grounds of human weakness.

Brothers and sisters, in the case of deliberate sin, how will a Christian plead under the New Testament? God has given every Christian the Holy Spirit such that by the Spirit’s enabling he can triumph in the face of every temptation. So this leaves him without excuse. The fearful truth is that if sin



is committed deliberately, there is no longer a sacrifice to atone for it. As we saw earlier, deliberate sin is decidedly a form of apostasy.

For this reason many in the early church era (including, notably, the first Christian emperor Constantine) would not get baptized until they reached their death beds, being afraid of the judgment awaiting those who commit post-baptismal sin and particularly deliberate sin.

Concerning this very serious matter, I venture to make a suggestion, though I dare not be dogmatic about it: If I understand Scripture correctly, it seems to me that even in the case where a person has sinned deliberately, or thinks he has done so, he should repent immediately, pleading to God for forgiveness. What do we lose by throwing ourselves upon His mercy?

Whether forgiveness will be granted or not, we don't know, for admittedly the words in Hebrews 10:26 are unmistakably clear. And even John, known as the “apostle of love,” does say that we should not pray for the one who has committed “*a sin that leads to death*” (1John 5:16-17). But *all* sin leads to death (Rom.6:23). So clearly John is referring to a kind of sin that leads to death *irreversibly*, that is, a sin for which there is no sacrifice or forgiveness. Hence, it refers to intentional or defiant sin, of which the most heinous is apostasy.

Could it be the case that those who commit deliberate sin have so hardened their hearts against God to the extent they will adamantly refuse to repent, thus putting themselves

beyond the reach of mercy and forgiveness? If so, then a person who still genuinely repents shows thereby that he hasn't yet so hardened his heart as to be beyond mercy and forgiveness. And God looks into our hearts.

## **(2) A closer look at the meaning of "intentional sin"**

To gain a more precise understanding of the vital matter of intentional sin, we need to take a closer look at the words "intentional" and "sin".

(1) *Intentional*. The synonyms *intentional*, *willful*, *deliberate* all have to do with the human will. If a man's will is not free to function normally due to mental illness or derangement, he will not be held accountable for his actions in a court of law. Similarly, if our wills are not free, we wouldn't be liable for our actions before God's judgment seat. "Willful" presupposes at least a relative freedom of the will.

To assert that man's will is in total bondage to sin is also to assert that man is thereby absolved of responsibility for his sins. But Scripture holds man responsible for his sins, and prescribes the penalty he must bear for it. No plea based on the loss of the freedom of the will is anywhere entertained in the Word of God.

Some mistakenly think that Romans 7, especially in verses 15-19, speaks of a bondage of the will. A careful reading shows that *exactly the opposite is true*. The man who is in bondage to sin, as depicted there, repeatedly laments the fact that the good *he desires* to do, he finds himself unable

to do, but ends up doing “the very evil that *I do not wish*” (v.19b). The same lament is made in v.15, which the NIV translates concisely as “what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do”. His will is free but he is unable of carrying out what he wills. The fact that he is still capable of willing is clearly stated in v.18: “To will is present with me” (NKJV). The problem is not in the willing but in the doing: “how to perform what is good I do not find” (v.18b).

This truth can be illustrated by the case of a man in prison. His will remains free even though his body is incarcerated behind prison bars. He is unable to do what he wants to do, but the activity of his will is not immobilized by prison walls. Many followers of Christ, though imprisoned for years, have never lost their commitment and devotion to Christ. Their enemies can imprison the body but they cannot subdue the will. This is true of many political prisoners who remain committed to their ideology even after long imprisonment. That is the truth portrayed in Romans 7.

It is not true to Scripture or human experience to say that all non-Christians are necessarily compulsive law-breakers who cannot help but commit adultery, robbery, or murder. If unregenerate people were in such bondage as to be incapable of willing anything but evil, then even human courts of law cannot pass judgment upon them. Moreover, unregenerate judges would themselves be in the same predicament as the unregenerate accused. How then can they hand down just judgments? The plain fact is that unregenerate people can be good law-abiding citizens.

What then did Paul mean when he said that the good “I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (7:15)? This question leads us to the word “sin” as in “intentional sin”.

(2) *Sin*. An accurate understanding of the word “sin” in this context is necessary. The matter of “good” and “evil” is prominent in Romans 7 (vv.19,21). Hence Paul is concerned with *spiritual* realities, not *legal* ones. What is spiritual is *internal*, having to do with the “inner man,” or the spirit of man. The legal, on the other hand, is *external*; it cannot govern man’s will or what he thinks.

Once we understand the distinction between the spiritual and the legal, the inner and the outer, we will see how a person can be a law-abiding citizen, yet inwardly remain a wretched sinner before God.

Paul’s blamelessness with respect to the Law (Phil.3:6) which he observed meticulously (as some Jews today) in no way contradicts the fact that he still found himself in bondage to sin, as is so woefully expressed in Romans 7. Some people, failing to distinguish these two levels of life (the level of legal observances versus the spiritual level), conclude that the apostle was contradicting himself.

Sin on the spiritual level, as distinct from the legal, is understood in the light of the two great commandments: loving God and loving the neighbor (Mt.22:37-40; Mk. 12:29-31). Love in Scripture is not just a matter of emotions but of the will, just as obeying the commandments is a matter of the will. Moreover, *the two great commands are spiritual in character*. Love cannot be legislated into existence

by law. To have God’s love in us is possible only if we have God’s life in us. It is the new life that empowers us to fulfill His call to love.

Law delineates the actions to be carried out in certain situations, but cannot provide the power to do them on the spiritual level. That is why the law, on the moral level, is generally prohibitive in what it prescribes, “You shall not . . .” Law as such cannot legislate on the inner or spiritual life, but can only govern man’s external behavior. But love is of the heart, of the will. Love with its fruit stands outside the scope of law because, as Paul puts it, “*against such there is no law*” (Gal.5:23).

It is clear that the seriousness of “intentional sin” lies in the fact that it is committed first and foremost on the *spiritual level*. It is no mere external act, but an act emanating from the will, the heart, the spirit, and the innermost being of a person.

### **(3) The danger of willful sin: an illustration**

It is of the greatest importance that, after having been freed from the guilt and the power of sin, we exercise the utmost care never to willfully misuse our freedom in Christ. As disciples of Jesus, we have been granted the power to overcome temptation and to stand against the forces of evil. But that does not stop us from sinning if we deliberately choose to sin. We are especially open to this danger *if our commitment to the Lord is partial and therefore inadequate*.

Let me illustrate this with a story I read in *Daily Gleaner* (Feb.10, 1984), a Jamaican newspaper I picked up during a visit there. It is a news report about an ex-police chief in Mexico City. While he was still the chief of police, the authorities became suspicious when they found out that he was exceedingly rich. He owned two large estates, 17 thoroughbred horses, 19 collector's cars, a huge cache of weapons, and a super-modern discotheque to entertain his guests. One of his two residences was located in a resort city, and decorated with statues, fountains, and even gold bathroom fittings.

In his tax returns he declared a net worth of 600,000 American dollars, substantial by most standards. But his true worth was at least 12.5 million dollars, an amount that was scandalous given that he was earning a civil servant's salary. When the story came out, the people of Mexico, a poor country at that time, were outraged.

His main aide published a book describing his activities. The police chief would sometimes throw a party and use police helicopters to fly in 300 or more guests, with no scruples about using public funds for these events. He encouraged his officers to accept bribes. Drivers in Mexico City had to routinely pay bribes to avoid being charged with traffic violations. Mexico City's traffic is so congested that finding a place to park is often difficult. The usual solution is to park illegally and to give the policeman on the beat a bribe. A share of these bribes is passed on from officer to

officer, right up to the police chief, who also receives large bribes from other activities.

The book describes how the police chief was involved in fraud, homicide, and drug smuggling. The writer himself confesses to carrying out several of the murders on the orders of the police chief, who felt that his rank would protect him from prosecution. But when the investigators were closing in on him, he was nowhere to be found. He had already made his exit, taking a lot of money with him.

Here was a chief law enforcement officer who was supposed to protect the rights of the citizens and the welfare of the poor. Yet in his few years in office, he had stolen 12.5 million dollars. The chief guardian of the law turned out to be the biggest crook of all.

What was the root problem? Did this man initially join the police force with the intention of reaching the top and making a fortune through corruption? That is, was he a criminal from the start, with the intention of using his office for criminal gain? Or did he join the police force as an officer with noble ideals of law and justice, but as the temptations came along, he could not resist them and finally became the top crook of all? Which was the case? Was he a criminal in the first place, or was he a genuine officer who succumbed to temptation? How do we analyze this problem?

In the end it doesn't matter what his real motives were when he joined the police force, for what matters is the end result. Whether he started out as a criminal or as an honest man, he ended up being a criminal.

Ezekiel 33:13 says that if a righteous man returns to iniquity, none of his former righteous deeds will be remembered, and he will die. He may start off as a righteous man, but if he ends up in wickedness, he will be judged as a wicked man, not as a righteous man.

In this example, there was a fundamental problem of *commitment* either way. In the end it made no difference whether this person joined the police force with a commitment that eroded with time, or with a partial commitment, or with no commitment at all, because all these tend to end in the same way.

#### **(4) Partial commitment: A door to deliberate sin**

Why would a person sin deliberately? The problem is with the *will*. How do we prevent the deadly drift into deliberate or willful sin, for which no sacrifice remains to atone for it (Heb.10:26)? There is only one way: It is absolutely essential that we make sure that our will is *fully* yielded to God and is kept that way day by day by God's grace. "No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning" (1Jn.3:6).

Make sure that your will is wholly in line with God's. That is total commitment: Every part of your will—every aspect of your life—must be unreservedly committed to God. If this is not the case, brothers and sisters, one of these days you could sin willfully.

How many Christians claim to be committed to the Lord when they are in fact only partially committed? Part of your will may be committed to God, perhaps 90%, but then you



are holding back 10%. In the face of the pressure or the temptation to sin, you will eventually succumb to it. It is said that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link. How long can a city stand when 10% of its walls are breached, providing an opening for the attacking forces?

A partially committed person is in fact uncommitted because he decides for himself what he chooses to commit and what to hold back. He, not Christ, is the lord of his own life. Partial commitment leads to dangerous self-delusion because you are claiming to be committed when in fact you are not. One of these days, when you are under temptation or persecution, you will find an exit door.

Total commitment, on the other hand, means that I burn the bridges behind me that lead back to the world and the old way of life governed by sin. After putting my hand to the plow, I don't look back (cf. Lk.9:62). I am finished with the past, forgetting the things behind me, and I press ahead. I live facing the future. I travel on a one-way street that goes forward.

But the partially committed person, like Lot's wife (Gen.19:26; Lk.17:32), keeps looking back. When the going gets tough, he sneaks out through the back door.

Why do so many marriages end in divorce? Would divorce happen if husband and wife were totally committed to one another? But because their commitment is partial, they open the escape hatch when their marriage runs into difficulties. If they were totally committed to each other in the first place, there would be no question of separation or

divorce. Commitment is commitment, so I will stick to the end. I will love to the end even if my love is not reciprocated.

Some people “try out” marriage. But marriage is not something you try out like a pair of shoes. If the marriage doesn’t fit, discard it like a pair of shoes, and go for divorce!

There are those who “try out” the Christian life. Nowadays there is a trial period for many products. If you are not satisfied with the product, return it within 30 days for your money back. But Christianity is even better. You can try it out for as long as you like. If in the end you don’t like it, just walk away. What kind of Christianity is this?

But the Lord says, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Lk.9:62). Hence let no Christian disqualify himself by heading for the exit doors when the going gets tough. In choosing to quit, we sin deliberately, exposing God’s Name to public shame. To desert God is to apostatize.

Let us examine our commitment before God. Paul’s exhortation, “Let a man examine himself,” is something that benefits us when we do it regularly, especially before partaking of the bread and the cup at the Lord’s table (1Cor. 11:28). May the Psalmist’s prayer be ours too:

Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins (NIV, “willful sins”). Let them not rule over me. Then shall I be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression. (Psalm 19:12,13)

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