

THE PULPIT

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YOUR JOURNEY TOWARD CHRIST

THE THIEF COMES ONLY TO STEAL, AND KILL, AND DESTROY (JOHN 10:10). How do evil spirits interfere with our lives? Let me answer with a simple illustration. Imagine that you are standing at one end of a long, narrow street lined on both sides with two-story row houses. At the other end of the street stands Jesus Christ, and your Christian life is the process of walking down that long street of maturity toward Him. There is absolutely nothing in the street which can keep you from reaching Jesus. So, when you receive Christ, you fix your eyes on Him and start walking.

But since this world is still under the dominion of Satan, the row houses on either side of you are inhabited by beings who are committed to keeping you from reaching your goal. They have no power or authority to block your path or even slow your step, so they hang out of the windows and call to you, hoping to turn your attention away from your goal and disrupt your progress by tempting you, accusing you and deceiving you. What is the enemy's goal in having his demons jeer you, taunt you, lure you, and question you from the windows and doorways along your path? He wants you to slow down, stop, sit down, and, if possible, give up your journey toward Christ. He wants to influence you to doubt your ability to believe and serve God.

Remember: He has absolutely no power or authority to keep you from steadily progressing in your walk toward Christ. And he can never again own you, because you have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and you are forever in Him (1 Peter 1:18, 19). But if he can get you to listen to the thoughts he plants in your mind, he can influence you. And if you allow him to influence you long enough through temptation, accusation and deception, he can control you. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, *"THE AUTHOR AND PERFECTER OF FAITH" (HEBREWS 12:2)* and take *"EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE TO THE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST" (2 CORINTHIANS 10:5).*

IN CHRIST

TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, UNLESS ONE IS BORN AGAIN, HE CANNOT SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD (JOHN 3:3). Being in Christ, and all that it means to Christian maturity and freedom, is the overwhelming theme of the New Testament. For example, in the six chapters of the Book of Ephesians alone there are 40 references to being in Christ and having Christ in you. For every reference to Christ being in you, there are 10 to you being in Christ.

Being in Christ is the most critical element of our identity. But we weren't born in Christ. We were born in sin, thanks to the first Adam. What is God's plan for transforming us from being in Adam to being in Christ? We must be born again (John 3:3). Physical birth only gains us physical life. Spiritual life, the eternal life Christ promises to those who come to Him, is only gained through spiritual birth (John 3:36).

What does it mean to be spiritually alive in Christ? Contrary to what many Christians believe, eternal life is not something you get when you die. You are spiritually alive in Christ right now. That's how you got to be in union with God, by being born again spiritually. You'll never be more spiritually alive than you are right now. The only thing that will change when you die physically is that you will exchange your old earthbound body for a new one. But your spiritual life in Christ, which began when you personally trusted Him, will merely continue on.

SALVATION IS NOT A FUTURE ADDITION; IT'S A PRESENT TRANSFORMATION. AND THAT TRANSFORMATION OCCURS AT SPIRITUAL BIRTH, NOT PHYSICAL DEATH. God's Word promises, *"HE WHO HAS THE SON HAS THE LIFE; HE WHO DOES NOT HAVE THE SON OF GOD DOES NOT HAVE THE LIFE" (1 JOHN 5:12).* Eternal life is something you possess right now because you're in Christ. Believe it.

THE ACCUSER OF THE BRETHREN

THE ACCUSER OF OUR BRETHREN . . . WHO ACCUSES THEM BEFORE OUR GOD DAY AND NIGHT (REVELATION 12:10). Next to temptation, perhaps the most frequent and insistent attack from Satan to which we are vulnerable is accusation. By faith we have entered into an eternal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, we are dead to sin and alive to God, and we now sit with Christ in the heavenlies. In Christ we are important, we are qualified, we are justified. Satan can do absolutely nothing to alter our position in Christ and our worth to God. But he can render us virtually inoperative if he can deceive us into listening to and believing his insidious lies, accusing us of being of little value to God or other people.

SATAN OFTEN USES TEMPTATION AND ACCUSATION AS A BRUTAL ONE-TWO PUNCH. HE COMES ALONG AND SAYS, "WHY DON'T YOU TRY IT? EVERYBODY DOES IT. BESIDES, YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH IT. WHO'S GOING TO KNOW?" THEN AS SOON AS WE FALL FOR HIS TEMPTING LINE, HE CHANGES HIS TUNE TO ACCUSATION: "WHAT KIND OF A CHRISTIAN ARE YOU TO DO SUCH A THING? YOU'RE A PITIFUL EXCUSE FOR A CHILD OF GOD. YOU'LL NEVER GET AWAY WITH IT. YOU MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP BECAUSE GOD HAS ALREADY GIVEN UP ON YOU." We have all heard Satan's lying, hateful voice in our hearts and consciences. He never seems to let up on us.

Many Christians are perpetually discouraged and defeated because they believe his persistent lies about them. And those who give in to his accusations end up being robbed of the freedom that God intends his people to enjoy. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT WE DON'T HAVE TO LISTEN TO SATAN'S ACCUSATIONS AND LIVE IN DESPAIR AND DEFEAT. SATAN IS NOT YOUR JUDGE; HE IS MERELY YOUR ACCUSER. When Satan's accusations of unworthiness attack you, don't pay attention to them. Instead respond, "I have put my trust in Christ, and I am a child of God in Him. I have been rescued by God from the fire of judgement, and He has declared me righteous. Satan cannot determine a verdict or pronounce a sentence. All he can do is accuse me—and I don't buy it."

WE ARE BUTTERFLIES

FOR IT IS GOD WHO IS AT WORK IN YOU, BOTH TO WILL AND TO WORK FOR HIS GOOD PLEASURE (PHILIPPIANS 2:13). WE PRESENT JESUS AS THE MESSIAH WHO CAME TO DIE FOR OUR SINS. WE TELL PEOPLE THAT IF THEY ACCEPT CHRIST THEY WILL GO TO HEAVEN WHEN THEY DIE. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT? FIRST, IT'S ONLY HALF THE GOSPEL. SECOND, IT GIVES THE IMPRESSION THAT ETERNAL LIFE IS SOMETHING WE GET WHEN WE DIE. JESUS HAD TO DIE FOR SINS IN ORDER TO CURE THE DISEASE THAT CAUSED US TO DIE. THEN HE GAVE US LIFE, MAKING US NEW CREATIONS IN CHRIST.

SUPPOSE THAT YOU ARE A PROSTITUTE. ONE DAY YOU HEAR THAT THE KING HAS DECREED THAT ALL PROSTITUTES ARE FORGIVEN. SINCE YOU'RE A PROSTITUTE, THAT'S GREAT NEWS! BUT WOULD IT NECESSARILY CHANGE YOUR BEHAVIOR OR YOUR SELF-PERCEPTION? PROBABLY NOT. YOU MAY DANCE IN THE STREETS FOR A WHILE, BUT CHANCES ARE YOU WOULD CONTINUE IN YOUR SAME TRADE. YOU WOULD SEE YOURSELF AS NOTHING MORE THAN A FORGIVEN PROSTITUTE.

NOW SUPPOSE THE KING NOT ONLY FORGAVE YOU, BUT HE MADE YOU HIS BRIDE AS WELL. YOU'RE A QUEEN. WOULD THAT CHANGE YOUR BEHAVIOR? OF COURSE. WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO LIVE AS A PROSTITUTE IF YOU WERE A QUEEN? THE CHURCH IS THE BRIDE OF CHRIST! YOU ARE FAR MORE LIKELY TO PROMOTE THE KINGDOM IF YOU ARE THE QUEEN RATHER THAN A FORGIVEN PROSTITUTE. WE ARE NOT REDEEMED CATERPILLARS; WE ARE BUTTERFLIES. WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO CRAWL IN SOME FALSE HUMILITY WHEN YOU ARE CALLED TO MOUNT UP WITH WINGS AS EAGLES?

HUMILITY IS NOT PUTTING YOURSELF DOWN WHEN GOD IS TRYING TO BUILD YOU UP. SELF-ABASEMENT HAS THE APPEARANCE OF WISDOM, BUT IT HAS NO VALUE AGAINST FLESHLY INDULGENCE ACCORDING TO COLOSSIANS 2:23. HUMILITY IS CONFIDENCE PROPERLY PLACED. WE NEED TO BE LIKE PAUL AND "PUT NO CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH" (PHILIPPIANS 3:3).

HOW YOU ARE PROGRAMMED

SEE TO IT THAT NO ONE TAKES YOU CAPTIVE THROUGH PHILOSOPHY AND EMPTY DECEPTION, ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION OF MEN . . . RATHER THAN ACCORDING TO CHRIST (COLOSSIANS 2:8). THE FIRST STEP TOWARD THE FORMATION OF STRONGHOLDS IN OUR MINDS CAN BE CALLED "ENVIRONMENTAL STIMULATION." YOU WERE DESIGNED TO LIVE IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD AND FULFIL HIS PURPOSES, BUT YOU WERE BORN PHYSICALLY ALIVE AND SPIRITUALLY DEAD IN A HOSTILE WORLD (EPHESIANS 2:1, 2).

BEFORE YOU CAME TO CHRIST, ALL YOUR STIMULATION CAME FROM THIS ENVIRONMENT. EVERY DAY YOU LIVED IN THIS ENVIRONMENT YOU WERE INFLUENCED BY IT AND PRECONDITIONED TO CONFORM TO IT. THE WORLDLY STIMULATION YOU WERE EXPOSED TO WAS BOTH BRIEF AND PREVAILING. BRIEF STIMULATION INCLUDES INDIVIDUAL EVENTS, SITUATIONS, PLACES AND PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS YOU EXPERIENCED. YOU WERE INFLUENCED BY BOOKS YOU READ, MOVIES YOU WATCHED, MUSIC YOU LISTENED TO, AND TRAUMATIC EVENTS YOU EXPERIENCED OR WITNESSED, SUCH AS A CAR ACCIDENT OR A DEATH IN THE FAMILY. YOU LEARNED A WAY (WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE BEEN GOD'S WAY) TO COPE WITH THESE EXPERIENCES AND RESOLVE THE CONFLICTS THEY PRODUCED.

PREVAILING STIMULATION CONSISTS OF LONG-TERM EXPOSURE TO YOUR ENVIRONMENT, SUCH AS THE INFLUENCE OF YOUR FAMILY, YOUR FRIENDS AND PEERS, YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD, YOUR TEACHERS, AND YOUR JOB. IF YOU GREW UP SEPARATED FROM GOD, AND WERE RAISED IN A NON-CHRISTIAN ENVIRONMENT, YOU DEVELOPED A PHILOSOPHY OF HOW TO SURVIVE, COPE AND SUCCEED IN THIS WORLD APART FROM GOD. WHEN YOU BECAME A CHRISTIAN YOUR SINS WERE WASHED AWAY, BUT YOUR PREDISPOSITION TO THINK AND BEHAVE A CERTAIN WAY, WHICH YOU DEVELOPED AS YOU ADJUSTED TO YOUR ENVIRONMENT, REMAINED PROGRAMMED IN YOUR MIND. IN FACT, YOU CAN BECOME A BORN-AGAIN BELIEVER AND CONTINUE TO LIVE ON THE BASIS OF THE LIFESTYLE YOU DEVELOPED WHILE LIVING INDEPENDENTLY OF GOD. THAT IS WHY PAUL INSISTS THAT WE BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF OUR MINDS (RM. 12:2).

AN ENTIRELY NEW SELF

YOU WERE FORMERLY DARKNESS, BUT NOW YOU ARE LIGHT IN THE LORD; WALK AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT (EPHESIANS 5:8). EPHESIANS 5:8 DESCRIBES THE ESSENTIAL CHANGE OF NATURE WHICH OCCURS AT SALVATION. IT DOESN'T SAY YOU WERE IN DARKNESS; IT SAYS YOU WERE DARKNESS. DARKNESS WAS YOUR NATURE, YOUR VERY ESSENCE, AS AN UNBELIEVER. NOR DOES IT SAY YOU ARE NOW IN THE LIGHT; IT SAYS YOU ARE LIGHT. GOD CHANGED YOUR BASIC NATURE FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT.

THE ISSUE IN THIS PASSAGE IS NOT IMPROVING YOUR NATURE. YOUR NEW NATURE IS ALREADY DETERMINED. THE ISSUE IS LEARNING TO WALK IN HARMONY WITH YOUR NEW NATURE. WHY DO YOU NEED THE NATURE OF CHRIST WITHIN YOU? SO YOU CAN BE LIKE CHRIST, NOT JUST ACT LIKE HIM. GOD HAS NOT GIVEN US THE POWER TO IMITATE HIM. HE HAS MADE US PARTAKERS OF HIS NATURE SO THAT WE CAN ACTUALLY BE LIKE HIM. YOU DON'T BECOME A CHRISTIAN BY ACTING LIKE ONE. WE ARE NOT ON A PERFORMANCE BASIS WITH GOD. HE DOESN'T SAY, "HERE ARE MY STANDARDS, NOW YOU MEASURE UP." HE KNOWS YOU CAN'T SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF AN OLD SINFUL SELF BY SIMPLY IMPROVING YOUR BEHAVIOR. HE MUST CHANGE YOUR NATURE, GIVE YOU AN ENTIRELY NEW SELF-THE LIFE OF CHRIST IN YOU-WHICH IS THE GRACE YOU NEED TO MEASURE UP TO HIS STANDARDS.

THAT WAS THE POINT OF HIS MESSAGE IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: *"UNLESS YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS SURPASSES THAT OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES, YOU SHALL NOT ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN"* (MATTHEW 5:20). THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES WERE THE RELIGIOUS PERFECTIONISTS OF THEIR DAY. THEY HAD EXTERNAL BEHAVIOR DOWN TO A SCIENCE, BUT THEIR HEARTS WERE LIKE THE INSIDES OF A TOMB: REEKING OF DEATH. JESUS IS ONLY INTERESTED IN CREATING NEW PERSONS FROM THE INSIDE OUT BY INFUSING IN THEM A BRAND-NEW NATURE AND CREATING IN THEM A NEW SELF. ONLY AFTER HE CHANGES YOUR IDENTITY AND MAKES YOU A PARTAKER OF HIS NATURE WILL YOU BE ABLE TO CHANGE YOUR BEHAVIOR.

DEALING WITH ANXIETY

THE PEACE OF GOD, WHICH SURPASSES ALL COMPREHENSION, SHALL GUARD YOUR HEARTS AND YOUR MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS (PHILIPPIANS 4:7). CHRISTIANS HAVE FREQUENTLY RELIED UPON A SENSE OF PEACE AS EVIDENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S LEADING. IT IS COMMON TO HEAR PEOPLE SAY, "I JUST DON'T HAVE A PEACE ABOUT IT." I THINK THAT IS LEGITIMATE. I WOULD BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE PERSON WHO PROCEEDS WHEN HIS SPIRIT IS DISTURBED. GOD DOESN'T LEAD THROUGH ANXIETY. WE ARE TO CAST OUR ANXIETY UPON JESUS, BECAUSE HE CARES FOR US (1 PETER 5:7).

STILL, A LOT OF MONEY IS SPENT ON THE TEMPORARY "CURE" OF ANXIETY. PEOPLE CONSUME ALCOHOL, TAKE ILLEGAL DRUGS, TURN TO THE REFRIGERATOR, HAVE SEX ALL TO REDUCE THEIR ANXIETY. PRESCRIPTION DRUGS ARE REGULARLY DISPENSED FOR THE AILS BROUGHT ON BY ANXIETY. THE DRUG PUSHERS, OCCULT PRACTITIONER, AND OTHER PEDDLERS OF ESCAPISM ALL HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON: THEY REALLY DON'T CARE ABOUT THE CONSUMER. THEY ARE OUT TO MAKE A PROFIT. EVEN WORSE, WHEN THE TEMPORARY "CURE" WEARS OFF, WE HAVE TO RETURN TO THE SAME WORLD WITH THE ADDED PROBLEM OF HANGOVERS AND OTHER NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF FAKE HEALERS.

INTERNALLY, WE DESPERATELY NEED THE PEACE OF GOD: *"BE ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING, BUT IN EVERYTHING BY PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION WITH THANKSGIVING LET YOUR REQUESTS BE MADE KNOWN TO GOD. AND THE PEACE OF GOD, WHICH SURPASSES ALL COMPREHENSION, SHALL GUARD YOUR HEARTS AND YOUR MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS"* (PHILIPPIANS 4:6, 7). THE AWARENESS OF A TROUBLED SPIRIT SHOULD DRIVE US TO FIND THE PEACE OF GOD BY TURNING TO HIM AND ASSUMING OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO USE OUR MINDS.

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