

THE SENTENCE OF DEATH

In the past several chapters, we have been speaking about the fact that as Christians, we have two lives and two natures. From our father Adam, we received a natural, human life (PSUCHE Greek) with a fallen, sinful nature. When we are “born again” we receive from God the Father an uncreated life with the divine nature (ZOE Greek). Every believer in Jesus has within his being two lives which manifest two different natures. Consequently, when we live by our natural life, we express our sinful nature and when we live by the new, divine life, we manifest the holy nature of God. It is here then that Christians encounter a dilemma. How is it possible to be full of and manifest the life of God? Furthermore, how is it possible to be free from the old life which is constantly producing sin?

In the last chapter we spoke of the necessity of communion with God in order to be full of His life. Here we will focus on God’s wonderful plan to deliver us from sin.

To completely understand the plan, we need to fully comprehend the corruption of the human nature. When Adam and Eve partook of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, a profound change took place within them. The very nature of their lives was altered. They became sinful. The human life within them, which before was pure and sinless, became polluted with sin. The fruit of the fallen life is sin. It is the spontaneous product of the fallen life which is within them.

Men today sin, not because they slip up once in a while and do something wrong, but because it is their nature to do so. What comes out of them is simply an expression of what is within them. Although the full expression of this sinfulness is kept somewhat in check by governments, pressure from others and the human conscience, at various times in history this sin-principle has been unrestrained. Perhaps the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the more recent example of the Nazi “holocaust” will adequately illustrate this point.

Some may argue that man is not entirely sinful. Sometimes the natural man can produce some really laudable sentiments and actions. It is certainly true that men can and do exhibit good qualities, but sooner or later everyone does sin. It might be in some hidden, secret way, perhaps even only in their minds, but all men sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rm 3:23). If only we could see deeply into the heart of every man as God does, no doubt we would find in every “good” thought or deed an element of self-satisfaction, pride or selfish motive. This taint of “self” disqualifies the person from being truly righteous as God is. The truth is that man is irreparably sinful.

Perhaps a good way to understand the problem would be to think of a pitcher full of fruit juice. This juice is healthy and delicious in every way. But let us suppose that someone comes along and drops just a little bit of poison into the juice. The whole

container of juice becomes contaminated. It becomes undrinkable. Theoretically there is plenty of "good" juice in the pitcher. But all of it has become undrinkable. There is no way to safely separate the poison from the juice. The only solution is to throw the whole thing out. Depending on the container, even it too must be discarded.

When God created man, He gave them instructions concerning the tree of knowledge together with a stern warning. He said: "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17). God pronounced this sentence with good reason. To partake of this tree was to have their natures changed; their lives polluted. The only solution to this sin problem is to eradicate the sinner. The sinner, in order to sin no more, must surely die. In the universe which God created, this is the only way. The solution for sin is death. God's original pronouncement was and is true today. The Bible reads: "he who has died has been freed from sin" (Rom 6:7). This is the only possible way to rid humanity of sin. The race itself must be eliminated. The contaminating poison cannot be separated from the juice. All must be thrown out. Paul, the apostle, confirms this truth in his own life by stating: "but we had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (II Cor 1:9).

THE DIVINE PLAN

In the preceding chapters, we have been seeing that God created man with a marvelous plan in mind. His divine desire was to create a creature in His image and likeness who would eventually receive His life and become His bride. With the fall of mankind, it appeared that this desire of our Lord's was thwarted. What had originally been pure and good had been contaminated with evil. However, our God is extremely wise. Even before the foundation of the world, He foresaw that all of this would happen. With this foreknowledge, He planned and prepared a way to eventually accomplish all that was in His heart.

The first part of His plan which we have been understanding is that God has offered to human beings a substitute life. This Life of God (Eph 4:18) which we can receive through Jesus Christ is truly the answer. It is this Life which pleases God and it is this Life which does not, and in fact cannot sin. This is the ZOE Life about which we spoke in chapter 2.

The second part of the plan which we will be investigating here is how the old soul-life, with its old nature can be eliminated. (Let us be very clear here that we are not speaking about losing our physical life, but about our soul-life or PSUCHE.) There is only so much "room" in every human being. We cannot be filled to the brim with two "lives" at once. In order to be filled with God's life (ZOE), we must be delivered from our own (PSUCHE). As we have been understanding here, the solution to the problem is death. We must surely die.

Here is an aspect of the gospel which all too few Christians understand. Many people receive Jesus with the hope of some great improvement in their lives. Perhaps they are led to believe that they will feel better, they will find the solution to all their problems or even that they will become rich and prosperous. But the truth of God looms over them. Jesus stated clearly, "If any man will come after Me, let him take up his cross and follow Me" (Mt 16:24). To receive God's gift of Life and follow Him means that you must die. You, yes you—sinner—you must be eliminated from the universe. This is the only solution for you. It is an integral part of God's plan. Although we perhaps prefer to focus upon the love of God, our death is also part of the gospel and to really

understand the gospel, we must understand the aspect of death very clearly.

Have you really been convicted of sin? Do you really understand in the light of God how evil you are in your inward parts? Are you really repentant, not only for what you have done but also for what you are? When you received Jesus, did you do so with the understanding that it was the end of your own life? If you cannot honestly answer "yes" to these questions, then you are not right in your relationship with Jesus Christ. You have not really understood the gospel and you are in danger of missing most, if not all, of what God has in mind for you.

Let us take a little time here to speak of baptism. Clearly baptism is an integral part of the message which Jesus preached. We read: "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mr 16:16). Paul and the other apostles also practiced baptism. But what does baptism mean? It means that we are ready to die. To be immersed under water is not a bath. It symbolizes drowning, dying. We are baptized into Jesus' death (Rm 6:3). Our baptism signifies that we are confessing that we are worthy to die and that we are in fact ready and willing to experience the death which Christ has for us. It means that we have understood our sin and God's judgment upon it. Our baptism testifies to the end of all that we were, are or ever would want to be. We are agreeing with God's sentence of death and are ready for Him to apply it to us. If you have been baptized without this clear understanding and conviction, then you have truly missed the message of Jesus Christ.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Jesus said: "He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live" (Jn 11:26). Here is a great and important mystery. In Jesus Christ, we can actually experience death, yet still live. God's unalterable judgment that we must die can be executed upon us without eliminating us completely. Our Father, in His great wisdom, has made a way for us to pass through death, yet not be destroyed. In Christ, what we are as a natural human being can be crucified and be replaced with all that He is. We can pass through death into Life (I Jn 3:14).

Those who are in Christ Jesus do not bypass death. They pass through it. The necessity for God to eliminate sinners has not and cannot be changed. If He were to allow sinners to enter into His eternal kingdom, they would pollute the new world, just as they have polluted the old one. No amount of restraining or retraining the old nature will qualify it to enter into God's kingdom. It must be and will be eliminated. Glory to God that He has made a way for us. In Him, we can both experience death and resurrection. Just as Noah in his ark passed through the judgment of God, yet was not killed, so in Christ, we too can pass through death into Life.

The cross of Christ is at the center of the gospel message. This Roman instrument of torture and death is at the core of Christianity. But what does it mean? It is not just a Christian symbol or piece of jewelry. It speaks of the termination of life. It means the end of you. It means you are finished. Your hopes, your dreams, your opinions, desires, cares, plans and future are all gone. You yourself in fact have been judged and crucified. There is no longer any room for your "self" in the universe of God. And in your place is the Life of Another. Someone greater and more worthy than you is ready and willing to fill your being with all that He is. No longer will it be you who is seen and heard. No longer will it be your will that is done. No longer will what you care about predominate. Instead, the God of the universe will use your mind, emotions, will and even your body to do His will upon the earth.

When Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, in some spiritual way, which is hard to understand, we also died with Him (Rm 6:4-6). When He was raised from the dead, we also were raised up with Him. The cross of Christ is a place of death and resurrection. It is there that an important exchange is made. On the cross, we exchange all that we are for all that He is. Our soul-life with its sinful nature dies and His life with its holy nature lives in its place. We decrease and He increases (Jn 3:30). Our death with Him is a wonderful deliverance from what we are which makes room for the in-filling of all that He is.

If you are willing and ready for this, it is a great blessing and deliverance. If you have not settled in your mind that this is what you need and want with all of your being, then you will have great difficulty experiencing any spiritual progress. Without the experience of the cross, there is no true Christianity. Without the death of Christ operating within us, there can be no genuine walk with the risen Lord. Only through the cross of Christ can we be free from what we are and be filled with what He is. It is the cross which brings us into God and God into us in a powerful, supernatural way. Without death, there can be no resurrection. (See Pilip. 3:10,11).

In order to walk in "newness of life" (ZOE) (Rm 6:4) we must first pass through death. This is not something that happens all at once. It is a gradual process. If we are willing to walk with Jesus, we will experience death every day. Paul writes: "I die daily" (I Cor 15:31). As the life of God grows up within us, the experience of the cross deepens. We are "always carrying about (while) in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the Life of Jesus also might be manifested" (II Cor 4:10).

The application of or the experience of the cross of Jesus Christ—the execution of God's sentence—is made real to us through the Holy Spirit. It is not something which we can do to ourselves. No amount of effort will serve to alter the inner nature of our soul-life. Even striving to "deny ourselves" will not arrive at the goal. As we simply learn to walk in the Spirit day by day, all that is in Christ is made real to us. The death of Jesus on the cross becomes our daily experience as we are continually filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of God that applies the death of Jesus to our natural life and nature. His word says: "if by the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live (have ZOE Life, Greek)" (Rm 8:13).

This truth will help us understand the great need to be filled with God every day. Our natural abilities and strength are of no use as long as they are under the control of our old PSUCHE life. Unless we are walking daily in the Holy Spirit and the light of God, we will never be free from what we are as natural men. We will never have a life of victory over sin. Only through the action of the Holy Spirit making the death of Christ real to us will we have the daily experience of resurrection.

Here is the secret of true Christianity: the experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This secret was demonstrated by the three wise men who came to see the Lord at His incarnation. These wise men brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Myrrh is a spice which the men of that era used for embalming dead bodies. Therefore, this gift speaks of the death of Christ. Frankincense is an incense which, when burned, gives off a sweet smoke which ascends upward, referring to the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Gold is the only metal which does not oxidize or rust. It represents for us here the incorruptible nature of God. Joining all these things together gives us a marvelous picture. The experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus brings us into the possession of the divine nature, the pure gold of all that He is.

THE OFFENSE OF THE CROSS

If you are reading this message and are in no way offended, perhaps you are not understanding what is being said. The preaching of the cross is truly an offense. It is a point of stumbling for many. When Jesus explained to the great crowd of His followers that He would be crucified, most of them left. They were offended with the idea of death. Jesus plainly tells us that He is a "stone of stumbling and rock of offense" (Rm 9:33). The very idea that what we are can never be acceptable to God is a bitter pill to swallow. To admit that we are sinners and that we need to be replaced with Another is humbling to the greatest extent. Therefore, only those who humble themselves can ever enter into God's kingdom. Truly Jesus said: "blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Mt 11:6).

The cross of Jesus Christ often causes offense. To yield unto death areas of our lives which we love and appreciate may be difficult in the extreme. What we are by nature, which may on the surface seem so good, is in reality a hindrance to God's best. However, in the heat of our situations this truth may be difficult to see. While there may be obvious problems in all of our lives which we are only too happy to be rid of, it is not uncommon to find that God wishes to slay something in us which we count precious. We must be ready for this. Our faith must rest in God, believing that He is able to raise up from the dead something much better than we have given to Him.

Unfortunately many people walk only so far with Jesus. Although they may continue to be "good church members" and lead outwardly moral lives, inwardly they are resisting the Holy Spirit. They have gotten to some point which they refuse to yield to God and there they stay. In reality such people have stopped following the Lord. These believers are in a very dangerous spiritual position. The hardening of a man's heart toward God can be so slow it is almost imperceptible. But in the end the result is destruction. Nothing of the old life will be able to endure in the presence of God. Our old, Adamic nature cannot inherit eternity.

The work which Jesus Christ did on the cross was complete. It is utterly sufficient to change us into His image from one degree of glory to another (II Cor 3:18). No part of our life has been labeled "too difficult." God has opened the way for us to be made new completely. However this experience does require some of our own co-operation. God is not going to force us into anything. We must be willing to deny ourselves, to pick up our cross and to follow Him. No doubt the old nature will resist this crucifixion. Many times everything within us will cry out that this is too much, this is too hard, this can't be God's way, this can't be "real Christianity." The love of self is the enemy of the cross and therefore the enemy of Christ. To recognize it for what it is and to condemn it with the same judgment which God has passed upon it is the only way we will be able to walk in newness of life and resurrection power.

When Jesus was explaining to the disciples that He must die, Peter, one of His most ardent followers, argued with Him saying: "Lord, this shall not happen to you" (Mt 16:23). In other words, he was saying: "Don't be so hard on yourself. Surely you don't need such a drastic solution." This too is often our response today, we think that to experience the cross is too hard, too difficult. Surely in the love of God He must have an easier way. But what was Jesus' response to this plea for self pity? He said, "Get behind me Satan. . . for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Mt 16:23). God's solution for sin is death. Jesus died in our place, so that through Him we could pass through death and into Life.

Some Christians mistakenly think that Jesus was the "second Adam," thus indicating that He came to start over and do a better job where Adam failed. However,

this is not the case. Jesus Christ was the “last Adam” (I Cor 15:45). When Jesus came to this earth, in God’s eyes the race of Adam ended. Fallen, sinful humankind was finished. The Most High’s judgment upon them was being carried out. When we enter into Jesus, we become part of a new race of beings. We become a new kind of creatures (II Cor 5:17). Now we are of the divine race. We have become the “sons of God” (Gal 4:6). The old “Adam” race is past and a newly generated type of being is coming into its own. Although this work is happening in secret, someday when the sons of God are manifested (Rm 8:19), all that has been done through Christ will become evident.

A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING

Now I would like to take a little space here to address a common misunderstanding. Sometimes in the New Testament these truths concerning the cross and our becoming new creatures are stated as if they had already happened. Galatians 2:20 reads, “I have been crucified with Christ,” seemingly indicating a work which is already done. Colossians 3:3 states, “For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” There certainly is a sense in which this is true because when Christ died His work was completed. He said: “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). However, this can cause confusion in believers’ minds. Many do not realize that this crucifixion must be made real to them. They do not understand that biblical truths are of no value to them unless they enter into the experience of them through the Holy Spirit. Some mistakenly think if they simply “believe” that they are already changed completely, they then are. Others imagine that since they have been forgiven, everything is now O.K., not realizing that this was just the beginning and that God still has important work to do in them.

The truth is that unless we enter into the experience of these things they will do us absolutely no good. Jesus Christ died for the sins of the whole world but only those who through faith enter into Him are benefited by it. In the same way the fact that we have died with Christ and have been raised with Him will do us no good whatsoever unless we through faith and obedience enter into the reality of it. It is not enough spiritually speaking to simply claim our “position in Christ.” That “position” must become our experience. If we do not enter into this good land which God has given us and possess it, then even though it is ours in theory, we will not obtain it. We must by faith in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, yield ourselves daily unto His death so that He can raise us up to walk in newness of life.

WHY DO WE SUFFER?

It is obvious from a careful reading of the New Testament that suffering is a large part of the Christian experience. Although some would like to try and eliminate suffering from the gospel, it is written clearly in each book of the New Testament. Since Christ already suffered and died for us, why is it necessary for us to suffer? Once again, this has to do with our entering into the experience of Christ. The Bible reads: “he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (I Pet 4:1). Peter teaches us that we are “partakers of Christ’s sufferings” (I Pet 4:13). Paul states that we “are partakers of the sufferings” (II Cor 1:7) and that he was entering into the “fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil 3:10). These and many other verses clearly show that followers of Jesus Christ will experience sufferings, not only from the devil but also from the hand of God. Why is this necessary and how does it work?

One important reason God allows suffering is to bring about change in our lives. Everyone in the world suffers in some way or another. Yet they are not changed into the image of Christ. But the suffering which God allows serves a very important purpose for those who are entering into Life. The difficulties and pain through which we pass in this life work in us to expose sin. When we suffer, our reaction to it is very often sinful. We complain, we become impatient and lose our temper, we become whining, self-centered individuals. We become angry, bitter, unloving and hateful. Our severest difficulties bring up from deep within us all kinds of ungodliness. Suddenly our own righteousness, our own goodness, does not work any more.

For example, when someone else has caused you extreme emotional or physical pain for many years, sooner or later, your own strength to endure runs out. Your heart changes toward them. You would like to see them dead. You have become a murderer! No wait, you have not become a murderer, you always were one, it was just hidden within you from yourself and others. This and many other similar reactions are exposed within us by the operation of suffering.

Unless and until we have really suffered, we do not truly see what we are like within. God, however, knows what lies within our hearts. Therefore, He allows us to suffer to expose to us what He already sees. Suffering is God's backhoe. Through it, He digs in our hearts to reveal the depths of evil which reside there. Often we are tempted to think that we are not really that type of person, it is just the sufferings of our situation which have caused us to become like that. My friend, let me tell you a secret. Nothing can come out of your heart that is not already in there. It is "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Lk 6:45). We sin, because sin lives in our hearts. It is our nature to sin. In every human being lies secretly hidden the most repulsive of reactions and desires. All it needs is the proper opportunity to express itself. Murder, lust, hate, unclean passion, gossip, lying, greed, pride, jealousy and many more detestable things live in every natural man. If you do not know this about yourself, then you have not yet really suffered and have not had the opportunity to really repent before God for what you are.

Suffering then brings us the opportunity to die. When sin is exposed within us, we then have the wonderful opportunity to deny ourselves. We can deny our self-life the right to express its natural reaction to our situation. We can, through the Holy Spirit, die to self and live to God. This is how suffering can work for our good. When we suffer and we find within ourselves ungodly reactions, we can cry out to God that He would substitute what He is for what we are seeing that we are. We can fervently pray that we would not be allowed to live, expressing such vileness, but that He would live in and through us. We grow spiritually, not merely by suffering, but by turning to God in the middle of our suffering. Through the operation of the Holy Spirit, the death of Christ can be applied to our old life (PSUCHE) and a new eternal Life (ZOE) can live in its place. Jesus has already passed through death for us. When we enter into Him, that is we enter into His presence by the Spirit in the middle of our sufferings, there we will find His resurrection glory.

There is often a great temptation when we suffer to arrange for our own deliverance, to find a way of escape from the "situation" which is causing us pain. And, as Peter with the Lord, there will always be some well-meaning person nearby to encourage us to do just that. How easy it would be to just climb down off the cross and to spare our natural life suffering and death. How easy it is to "get that divorce" or move away from an uncomfortable situation. However, if we take this way, we will never enter into all the fulness of Christ and His resurrection glory. The choice is ours

to make every day.

Let us never blame our situation for what our reaction to it might be. When the Lord Jesus was tested, nothing impure was found. Before the Jews could sacrifice a lamb, it was necessary for the priests to examine it for any defects. So too, before Jesus was sacrificed for us, it was necessary for Him to be looked over for any flaws. Pontius Pilate examined Him. Herod too had his opportunity. The Roman soldiers took every possible chance to test and try the Son of God. He was mocked, beaten, stripped naked, tortured and finally killed. During all this time, not one single wrong word did He say. Not one evil attitude was expressed. Not even one expression of His face revealed hatred or revenge. This One was truly holy. Nothing sinful lurked within Him, therefore nothing evil could come out of Him. He had passed the test. Pilate said, "I find no fault in this man" (Lk 23:4). I'm sure he could not have said this about any other man. Herod gave up trying and sent Him back to Pilate. The leader of the soldiers, who no doubt had seen many other men crumple under such torture, testified: "Truly this was the son of God" (Mt 27:54). Here was a perfect, sinless man.

Dear friends, this is the Christ that lives in every believer. His life is in us and He greatly desires to be expressed through us in every situation of our lives. The only obstacle is us. Are we ready and willing to die to ourselves and be filled with Him? Are we willing to be rid of what we are to receive what He is? He will do nothing within us without our complete, total permission. We must be ready to die, to take up our cross and follow Him. Let us agree with God's sentence of death upon the fallen race. Let us through Jesus, allow Him to execute His judgment upon it. Only then will we be in a position to experience all that He is. Only when we have experienced the death of Christ working thoroughly within us and the resurrection of Christ flowing through us will we be able to say with Paul, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). This must not remain merely our doctrine but must become our experience.