

THE PATH OF THE CROSS – VICTORIOUS LIVING

Scriptures tell us that the Spirit and the flesh oppose each other endeavouring to gain control of our lives. If we allow the Holy Spirit to put to death, our carnal fleshly nature, we may embark on a life of victorious living.

THE ANGUISH OF DISOBEDIENCE

The struggle to walk on the path of obedience is full of anguish and heartache for those who have not received teaching about the "path of the cross." Paul acknowledged the frustration encountered in such a walk, *"I can will what is right, but I cannot perform it [I have the intention and urge to do what is right, but no power to carry it out] For I fail to practice the good deeds I desire to do, but the evil deeds that I do not desire to do are what I am [ever] doing."* (Romans 7:15 Amplified Bible).

It seems almost inevitable that as new Christians we start on our spiritual pilgrimage by attempting to live up to the standards of God's law in our own strength. We attempt to overcome the inherent corruption of our human nature with determination and perseverance. Time and again we set out to overcome this or that flaw, but fail abysmally.

Many people become resigned to accepting that this is the normal Christian walk. Knowing what is right, they try to live up to it, and when they fail, they pray for forgiveness--time and time again. While it is true that *"the blood of Jesus Christ"* [continually] *"cleanses us from all sin"* (1 John 1:7), this is still a mediocre walk of continuing failures.

It seems that we as Christians must come to an end of ourselves, before we can be brought by the Spirit to see the impossibility of taming our natures through our own personal effort.

In his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul explains why it is impossible for us to be obedient to God's will in our own strength. He says that we have (1) a carnal nature bound in fleshly desire, and (2) an inherent legacy of sin from fallen man that compels our carnal natures to commit sins--a force so strong and insistent that it becomes to us a law of sin in our members.

Paul concludes, *"..with the mind [ie with my reasoning and determination] I myself [in my heart] serve [or choose to honour] the [whole moral] law of God, but [the reality is that] with the flesh [I honour instead] the law of sin."* (Rom 7:25).

Before proceeding any further, it is important to establish the difference between the terms 'sin' and 'sins.' In the context of this study, SIN is the nature or character of sin. In general terms, it is that which opposes God. It is out of the nature of SIN that individual SINS are conceived and committed.

Now let us go back and look more deeply into Paul's description of the Christian's dilemma. *"Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, BUT SIN THAT DWELLS IN ME. I find then a law, that evil is present WITH me, the person who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."* (Romans 7:20-23).

In summing up our experience as Christians, we find that our renewed spirits approve and even delight in the moral precepts of God's law. But despite this, we continually fall short in obedience. Paul attributes our constant failure to a power or 'law of sin' which acts upon our carnal natures, compelling us to commit sins.

The important thing to note here is that Paul says that this law of sin is not of ourselves--that is, it is not of our own carnal natures. He states, ***"Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, BUT SIN THAT DWELLS IN ME."***

The ORIGIN of the LAW of SIN

The power or law of sin is an implantation of Satan imposed on man as a result of the Fall.

The prophet Jeremiah tells us that God ***"...search[es] the heart, [and] test[s] the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings."*** (Jer 17:10). When tested in the Garden of Eden, man chose to obey Satan rather than God. Since sin is that which opposes God, and man chose sin rather than obedience, he received ***"according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings."*** Satan, who is the epitome of sin or opposition to God, was granted the authority to implant a law of sin in fallen mankind. It is an inherent part of what Paul calls our ***"old man."*** (Rom 6:6, Eph 4:22, Col 3:9).

What Constitutes the OLD MAN?

The ***"old man"*** is all that we were before our salvation and regeneration in Christ. Characteristics associated with the ***"old man"*** are:

- A spirit that is virtually dead to the spiritual things of God. Part of the salvation process is the regeneration of our spirits.
- A carnal nature with fleshly desires that entice us to commit sins. In Colossians, Paul describes the old man plagued by this carnal nature in terms of ***"...the body [or the whole person] of [or who is under the sway of] the sins of the flesh..."*** (2:11).
- A power or law of sin which imposes further pressure on our carnal natures, compelling us to commit sins. In Romans, Paul describes the old man held captive by the law of sin in terms of ***"the body [or the whole person] of [or who is held in the power of] sin."*** (6:6).
- The old man is held captive by the spirit of the world. It is by the operation of the power of sin over fallen mankind that Satan has become ***"..the ruler of this world.."*** (Jo 12:31, 14:30, 16:11).
- The old man is under the curse of the Fall, the end result of which is eternal damnation.

Paul acknowledges the hopeless state of the old man when he says, ***"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"*** (Rom 7:24). But this statement of despair is quickly followed by a triumphant cry. ***"I thank God--[my deliverance comes] through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*** (Rom 7:25).

In the following verse (which is the first verse of Chapter 8) Paul explains the foundation for his, and our, victory. ***"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus [ie those who have received unto themselves the blessings of His cross], who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."*** (Rom 8:1).

To walk ***"according to the flesh"*** is to try and overcome the legacy of sin from fallen man by our own will power and effort; by trying to earn our salvation; by trying to tame our sin-controlled fleshly natures, and so on. To walk ***"according to the Spirit"*** is to receive and walk in the light of the victory of Christ's cross. This walk of victory is referred to as 'the path of the cross.'

THE PATH OF THE CROSS

Paul's commission to the Gentiles was to reveal the truth of the cross and its victory over sin--"*to open their eyes [in order] to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.*" (Acts 26:18). He did this by teaching how, through His cross Jesus removed Satan's authority to hold us in bondage to sin, along with all of its dire consequences.

"And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements [as in a bill of debt] that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." (Col 2:14).

VICTORY over our FLESHLY NATURE and the POWER of SIN

In this study, the primary emphasis is in dealing with (1) the carnal nature of flesh, and (2) the power or law of sin.

Even though Jesus has taken away Satan's legal authority to inflict us with a power of sin, Satan does not remove it. What Paul expresses in Romans 7 is that the law of sin remains with us until we specifically refute and reject it. Like every other benefit of the cross, we have to claim Christ's victory over sin by faith. To a Christian, this imposition of a nature of sin by Satan is illegal. It must therefore be rejected on the grounds of Christ's finished work on the cross.

Since we were not created to live a life of continuous and unending failures, God has ordained a method, or pathway, by which we may overcome both our carnal natures and the law of sin in our members, and thereby live a victorious life. This pathway, generally referred to as 'the path of the cross,' is outlined in Chapter 6 of Paul's letter to the Romans.

The first ten verses of this chapter describe how we as Christians have been brought into a vital union with Jesus Christ and His experience on the cross. When Jesus submitted Himself to the penalty of the cross, He was more than a representative of mankind. In God's eyes He was 'corporate man,' incorporating within Himself and His experience, the whole of mankind. That is why Paul is able to say that in being baptised into Jesus Christ, we are made one with Him in His whole experience--His death, His burial, and His resurrection.

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin." (Rom 6:3-6).

UNION With CHRIST in His DEATH

God's solution to our untameable fleshly nature under the power of sin (called here "*our old man*" and "*the body of sin*"), is to incorporate it in Christ's death on the cross. Everything to do with the old man--the carnal nature held captive by the power of sin and the spirit of the world and subject to the curse of the law--was included in Christ's death on the cross. And because we are incorporated into Christ's death, Paul says that we are to consider every part of our old man put to death in Him.

THE FLESH

We are to reckon that we, including our carnal nature, are crucified with Christ. "*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal 2:20 KJV).*

DEAD TO THE WORLD

We are crucified to the world—"*...by* [‘our Lord Jesus Christ’] *the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world..*" (Gal 6:14).

DEAD TO THE LAW

We are crucified to the Law—"*But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by..*" (Rom 7:6).

DEAD TO SIN

Paul asserts that we are dead to the power of sin. "*For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon [as an accomplished fact] yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Rom 6:10-11).

Our RIGHTEOUSNESS in HIM

We receive additional light on Christ dealing with our sin by studying a key verse in 2 Corinthians: "*He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*" (2 Co 5:21 NASB).

This verse begins by emphasising Christ’s sinless nature: He "*who knew no sin.*" This is followed by the statement that God made Jesus "*to be sin.*" In ‘Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament,’ the words "*to be sin,*" are explained as follows; "Not a sin offering, nor a sinner, but the representative of sin. On Him, representatively, fell the collective consequence of sin." (vol3:p321).

The fact that God made Christ "*to be sin*" does not imply that Christ’s own nature underwent corruption. Mankind’s sin was laid upon Him as a burden, but it was not incorporated into His sinless nature. Whilst He Himself remained perfectly sinless, as the representative of sin He bore the full responsibility for the power of sin that had been laid on mankind at the Fall.

Having taken upon Himself this identification with sin, He was then required to bear all of its evil consequences. This involved all the curses of the broken law--sickness, pain, infirmity, poverty, rejection, separation from God, and finally, death. Now that Christ has already borne God’s judgment and the penalty of sin on behalf of mankind, we as Christians are no longer required to bear it.

The PARADOX of OUR DEATH to SIN

In his letter to the Romans, Paul states that "*our old man was crucified with Him* [ie Christ]." When He died our "*old man*", or "*body of sin*", was taken to death in Him. But a few verses later, Paul urges Christians, "*...do not let sin reign in your mortal body...*" [Rom 6:12].

Here we have a paradox. Firstly we are told that God destroyed our body of sin by the power of the cross, but then we are commanded not to let sin reign in us. This means in effect that it is still in us. The fact is that the law of sin inherited from Adam, and our nature of fleshly appetites and lusts, both remain active in us--until they are conquered by the application of the cross of Jesus.

Before our conversion, we were held captive by the power of sin. Acting on our carnal nature, it compelled us to sin. The law of sin in our members brought us in to sin over and over again, and we were powerless to withstand its persistent demands.

However when Christ accepted upon Himself the full weight of God's punishment for the sin of mankind, Satan's legal right to imprison us under the power of sin was removed. This was made evident to some degree at our conversion, when the desire to habitually sin was removed from us, and replaced with a yearning to live righteously before God.

Now, because of the cross of Christ, we have the means to walk in victory over sin—that is, if we walk in the light of the truth.

UNION With CHRIST in His RESURRECTION

At the same time that he declares our death in Jesus Christ, Paul emphasises the positive side of our identification with Him in His crucifixion. ***"For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live [in union] with Him."*** (Romans 6:5-6,8).

Note that the ***"also shall be"*** does not relate to a future time, but is a logical consequence of fulfilling the previous conditions. That is, IF we willingly partake of union with Him in His death, then we shall be united with Him in His resurrection, and therefore partakers of His risen life. It is by the divine life of Jesus in us that we can establish personal victory in our lives.

PUTTING ON and PUTTING OFF

Paul adds more light on this walk on the path of the cross, by using the illustration of putting on and taking off clothing. First of all, reckoning ourselves dead to sin, requires us to 'put off' the sin nature. The apostle urges Christians to ***"put off the old man with his deeds"*** (Col 3:9), and to ***"put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."*** (Rom 13:14).

To ***"put off"*** is to make a conscious decision to reject the demands of sinful flesh, and testify to the death of the ***"old man"*** through the cross of Jesus. The reality of our Christian walk is that when the sin nature is 'put off,' Christ is enthroned in our hearts. If we revert to yielding to the demands of sinful flesh, then Christ is dethroned and our old man occupies His place. This need not happen, because the power of the 'body of sin' was destroyed by the cross.

In regard to the command to ***"put on the Lord Jesus Christ,"*** the Greek word 'enduo,' which is translated here as ***"put on,"*** has the additional meaning to 'array' or to 'clothe, in the sense of 'sinking into a garment.' Not only do we believe that we are 'clothed' with Christ, but we also agree to allow our own lives to be submerged or hidden in Christ. ***"For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."*** (Col 3:3).

His presence and life are in us, and encompassing us in all our circumstances. From now on we are to do all things ***"according to His working which works in [us] mightily."*** (Col 1:29). Our whole Christian walk should be set on the foundation of our unity with Christ in His death, and consequently our new life united with His resurrection life--hidden away in His abiding presence.

The question arises: How often is it necessary to ***"put off the old man"*** and to ***"put on the Lord Jesus Christ"***? It is important to recognize that man is not entirely released from the curse of the Fall--even by the cross. The flesh never fully retires or relinquishes its demand to be satisfied. In this respect it constantly opposes the Spirit. ***"I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish."*** (Gal 5:16-17). Both the flesh and the Spirit ***"lust"*** after, or desire to take possession of man's heart. Therefore they are ***"contrary,"*** or constantly opposed to one another.

Because the flesh and the Spirit are constantly warring for the possession of our souls, the path of the cross is a daily walk. In the same way that we prepare for the day by taking off our pyjamas and putting on our clothes, it should be a normal part of our spiritual preparation for the day to ***"put off the old man,"*** and to ***"put on the Lord Jesus Christ."*** Jesus said, ***"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."*** (Lu 9:23).

The TESTIMONY of the SPIRIT

In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul writes, ***"For if you live according to [the desires of] the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds [or habitual practices] of the body [of sin], you will live."*** (Rom 8:13). Note that it is the Holy Spirit who puts to death ***"the flesh with its passions and desires"*** (Ga 5:24), and who establishes us in union with Christ's life.

The catalyst which causes the Holy Spirit to act is our testimony to the Word of God. The Holy Spirit will always respond in living power to ***"the word of [our] testimony"*** (Rev 12:11), particularly when it is to 'the word of the cross.' However there is one condition. We must really want the passions and desires of the flesh put to death, for the Holy Spirit will only respond in accordance to the true state of our hearts.

THE DEEPER WORK OF THE CROSS

The path of the cross we have described should be the normal walk of all Christians. However there is another dimension to the path of the cross which is more penetrating and profound. And that is to put our carnal nature to death permanently, which requires a much deeper work by the Holy Spirit. This deeper work takes place on a pathway of suffering and refinement. It involves the Holy Spirit progressively purging out the old nature and replacing it with the very nature of Christ.

Suffering is the necessary catalyst required to break down the stronghold of flesh. The apostle Peter wrote, ***"Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God"***. (1 Peter 4:1-2).

Drinking Christ's cup of suffering is not a popular teaching. In fact few Christians embark on this deeper path of the cross, requiring as it does our complete submission to the Holy Spirit's cleansing and purifying work in us. This means being prepared to have the old nature stripped away by the purging of suffering, so that it can be replaced by the nature of Christ.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul describes his willingness to suffer the death of his own sinful nature, in order to receive in its place the divine nature of Christ. He begins by discounting the reliability of his own nature. ***"For we are the [true spiritual] circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh."*** (Phil 3:3). Then he lists his natural attributes: ***"..circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."*** (Phil 3:5-6).

Even though these attributes were admired by traditional Jews, Paul willingly lays them aside. Instead he has come to a settled conviction that anything that stands in the way of him being one with the Lord, is to be counted as loss and as rubbish to be discarded. ***"..I also count all things loss for the excellence of the [intimate and personal] knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him.."*** (Phil 3:8-9).

Paul then declares his willingness to identify with Christ's sufferings, so that he might attain a new nature, resurrected out of the death of his 'old man': ***"...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."*** (Phil 3:10-11).

When Paul says that he wants to know *"the power of His resurrection,"* he means that he wants to experience the same power which raised Jesus from the dead--and that power filling his whole being, overcoming his sin nature, and producing in its stead the divine nature of the Lord.

In saying that he wants to be *"conformed to [Christ's] death,"* Paul makes it clear that he is not talking about his physical death, but rather the death of his old nature.

He continues, *"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* (Phil 3:12-14).

Who shall tread on this deeper path of the cross? Paul says that only the spiritually mature have the state of mind and heart necessary to submit to this deeper work by the Holy Spirit. *"Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you."* (Phil 3:15).

The Purpose Of The Deeper Path Of The Cross

The basis of all fruitfulness in ministry is resurrection life. This resurrection life must by definition be preceded by death. Jesus said, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless an ear of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit."* (John 12:24).

The old nature is destroyed through suffering, so that it can be replaced by the life of Jesus. The deeper work of the cross releases the new nature of Christ, which then ministers spiritual life to the rest of the church. When the "old man" has been dealt with to such a degree that it has lost its power and 'dies', the life of Jesus may flow freely in ministry without any interference from fleshly intrusion. The Lord is able to use such a person to minister His life to the church, producing *"much fruit."*

Paul relates this process to the Corinthians. *"We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed-- always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you."* (2 Cor 4:8-12).

The Preparation Of God's Anointed Ministers

The Lord's preparation of spiritual leaders is a completely different process to that which is used to prepare worldly leaders. In the world, the prospective executive is equipped with intellectual skills, academic qualifications, and self confidence. On the other hand, the Lord's preparation of leaders involves the stripping away of all such independence and self assurance, leaving in its place an absolute reliance on Him. Thus prepared, the Lord's servants *"have no confidence in the flesh."* They turn continually to the Lord, doing all things in the strength and ability that He supplies.

Of the two methods of preparation described, the worldly one is the most frequently chosen in the twenty first century church. Prospective ministers attend a bible college and receive tuition enabling them to preach fluently. With commendable effort they pass the required examinations and receive recognised qualifications, which in turn authorises them to take up a leadership position in 'a church.' Despite the zeal and effort required to obtain these qualifications, this process is still a poor substitute for the preparation and anointing of the Holy Spirit.

OBEDIENCE IS FULFILLED THROUGH THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ was, and will always be, perfect in obedience. When we allow His life to reign in us, we become partakers of His obedience. The obedience of Christ becomes a spontaneous part of our experience. But since our sinful nature is naturally opposed to the Spirit of Christ, obedience is negated when our flesh is not put to death by the power of the cross--hence the importance of the path of the cross.

OBEDIENCE in the CHURCH

Paul was confronted by some members of the Corinthian church who were exalting themselves, and belittling his apostolic authority. In writing to the church, he reminded them that his position as a genuine apostle was validated by the power of Christ manifested in his ministry, and that he was prepared to use the authority entrusted to him to cast down all opposition to obedience to Christ.

"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled." (2 Cor 10:4-6).

This reading illustrates the authority entrusted to Paul, and all who walk in obedience to Christ. They have the authority to use the power of Christ's name to cast down every false thought and imagination that opposes obedience to Christ, and furthermore to punish all disobedience.

Because of their perseverance on the path of the cross, Christ can trust them with such authority, knowing that they will not engage in any unauthorized fleshly warfare against their brethren, no matter how much they are provoked. Because they are obedient servants, Christ is able to use them as His instrument in these circumstances. In effect it is Christ who is admonishing and disciplining His church and bringing it into obedience

A further matter that is highlighted in the reading is the possibility of the church as a whole being brought into obedience to the truth. The purpose of our warfare for the saints is to bring ***"every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your [i.e. the whole church's] obedience is fulfilled."***

The Greek word *'hupakoe,'* translated 'obedience,' means 'to obey what is heard,' or 'to be obedient (to Christ) in their listening.' Paul was ready to ***"punish all disobedience"*** in their midst when they as a church had been brought to a readiness to hearken to the truth, and respond to it with acceptance and cooperation.

An essential part in the restoring of Christ's authority as head of the church is the restoration of spiritually prepared leaders, who have had obedience perfected in them through the path of the cross. Like Paul they will be the Lord's instruments through whom He will be able to discipline and refine and cast down strongholds, to the end that He might bring His church into obedience to the truth.

To those who would have a legitimate ministerial office from the Lord, as in an apostle, prophet, evangelist, or pastor and teacher, the challenge of the deeper work of the cross in purging out the flesh is inescapable. It was to this end that Paul advised Timothy:

"This is a faithful saying: for if we (the carnal self) died with Him, we shall also live (in union) with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him." 2 Tim 2:11-12.