

DWELLING PLACES – Part One
The Book of Philippians #33

The term “dwelling places” is found frequently in the Bible. It speaks of both earthy and heavenly dwelling places. The reference we are most familiar with is the one found in John 14:2 where Jesus said,

JOHN 14:2

“In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.”

Jesus is of course speaking about Heaven and the place in which we will be able to dwell once He takes us home to be with Him. It is a place where the Lord Himself dwells. There is a river there whose streams make glad the city of God (Psalm 46:4) and on each side of this river are trees whose leaves will be for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2). This is a place full of light and goodness, a place to which we look forward and in which we will find our final dwelling place.

But heaven is not the only place where we have dwelling places. On earth we call them homes, humble abodes, “mi casa, tu casa”, or, as people in some neighborhoods label it, our “crib”. For those who spend over 40 hours a week at a job, their workplace can feel like a dwelling place because they spend more time there than at their place of residence. But for most of us our dwelling place is the place where we feel safe and secure. It is a place where we lay our heads, dream of better tomorrows, and give thanks for the blessings of today; a refuge from the struggles of life.

Besides being a physical location though a dwelling place can be a place where our thoughts reside. To dwell on something is to think about it in a pondering manner; to stay focused on something; to linger over it. To mentally dwell somewhere is to allow our thoughts to reside on a specific time, place, person, or event. You may remember Mary “pondered” the things in her heart the shepherds told her on the night Jesus was born. Our thoughts can transport us to incidents in time and we can choose to dwell there for a short while or for a season.

Memories are not bad in themselves for God created our ability for recall. Without memory we would have to constantly relearn everything. Without memory we could not function as human beings. But memories do not simply bring to mind events they also bring to the surface our feelings about the events.

Memories are like windmills that are constantly turning once powered by the winds of thought. Choose something to think about and the memories of time will start revolving, the escalator of past events will start moving, and the engine of emotion will gather steam bringing you to the doorstep of whatever you choose to dwell on. Try it. Think about your favorite song, your favorite person or your favorite place and see what emotion comes to the surface. When I think of my grandchildren I can see a little booty shaking as they dance to their favorite song; and I see some smiles while we talk about going to their favorite place. These memories bring happiness and contentment when I think of them.

But not all memories evoke pleasure. Some remind us of unhappy times, of hurtful words or loss. The song “The End of the World” was very popular in March of 1963. That is the month in which my grandfather died. So when I hear that song I am transported back to a time of sadness and loss. All of us have experienced things from our past that continually seek to reappear in the present, attempting to drag

us back into the past. An object, a song, a person or a place can be unpleasant reminders of the past that can turn our memories into enemies rather than friends.

Some things are just hard to get over. Memories that are especially painful or embarrassing and those with the biggest sense of loss seem to have the strongest pull. Though we are no longer experiencing the event in real time it is hard to resist the emotional turmoil these memories evoke. And once we allow these emotional memories to transport us back in time we find it hard to leave that place. And so we find ourselves dwelling there because the same emotion that brought us there also keeps us there.

These emotional dwelling places are what I want to address today - the things that transport us backwards in time and prevent us from being propelled forward to the upward call of God in Christ (Philippians 4:14). Things which fill our minds and excite our emotions are to be treasured if they are full of purity and truth. But if they are full of lies and captivity then they are to be avoided. In traveling this journey of discovery I want to use Paul as our example.

Paul had much to be proud of in his past but he also had much to regret. When the Risen Lord appeared to him on his way to Damascus, deeds which he once deemed as righteous suddenly turned to filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6); Having set out to persecute the people of “The Way” he came face to face with the One to whom they belonged, the One whom he was truly persecuting. He came face to face with The Way Himself (Acts 9:3-5).

While it is true that everyone presents a façade from time to time in order to prevent others from seeing their innermost thoughts, it is equally true that facades cannot be maintained forever. Eventually they crumble under the weight of truth. And Paul’s façade of Pharisaical righteousness crumbled under the weight of God’s eternal truth presented to Him on the road to Damascus.

A sudden awakening of guilt and shame caused Paul to repent as the Light of Eternal Truth descended upon a heart full of the deeds of darkness he had cultivated all his life. Working under the orders of God’s anointed priests Paul sought the destruction of those whom God called His beloved children. Suddenly, miraculously, he was now one of them – both a born-again child of God and one of the persecuted; Changed in an instant from being the Chaser to the one being chased.

As a man trained in the Scriptures I am sure these words of Isaiah came to mind:

ISAIAH 6:5

“Woe is me, for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, Jehovah of hosts.” (ASV)

For Paul a sudden and irreversible shift of paradigms had just occurred. What was he to do with this? What was he to think? He had to reimagine his whole life now in terms of what he had just experienced. What had so recently consumed his thoughts was now inconceivable. He had actually been working against God and not for Him. How could he have been so ignorant? How will he ever make it right?

If Paul had continued to dwell on his previous deeds which Jesus had just exposed, he would have been a miserable man indeed. But God did not will for Paul to remain a prisoner of his past but rather an ambassador of God’s future plan. God took a sin exposed man, spoke to him directly, and gave him a task

to do for the Kingdom of God. He called Paul His chosen instrument to bear His name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel (Acts 9:15).

Paul would not have been able to do something so radically different if he had continued to dwell in the past, continued to feel the shame and anguish over his past deeds, and continued to look back on who he used to be. And, like Paul, it is not possible for any of us to move forward as long as our hearts and minds remain shackled to the past.

So how did Paul do it? How did he move from what he was to what he became? Before we move too quickly let me remind you that Paul was a work in progress. He did not, as some have surmised, go immediately from Damascus to the first of his three missionary journeys. He tells us in Galatians the path he took after his conversion experience.

GALATIANS 1:16b-2:1

“I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord’s brother... Then I went into the regions of Samaria and Cilicia. I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, ‘He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.’ And they were glorifying God because of me. Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, talking Titus along also.”

It’s true that after Ananias healed Paul of his blindness and after spending several days with the disciples who were in that city, Paul began to preach of Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 9:19b-22). But we can see by the events Paul has just described that there was a learning curve, a period of time in which God spoke to Paul and the Spirit guided Paul into how to live out the life to which he had so recently been called. Certainly there was an urgency to do God’s will, to walk out this new life of faith. But there was also much to absorb. Paul not only had to learn how to do new things in new ways, he also had to learn how to undo old things and old ways. Speaking of the change is one thing. Living out these changes is another thing altogether.

As we have studied the book of Philippians over the past year or so Paul has revealed the lessons he has learned. It is through these teachings that Paul gives to us the answer as to how he was able to live a life free from the sins of his past. So let’s look today at what he said earlier in chapters three and four.

PHILIPPIANS 3:13b-14

“Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing but in everything with prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Paul starts with saying he is forgetting what lies behind him. Why? Because a person who is dwelling in the past cannot rejoice in the Lord always; A person whose emotions are tied to past evil

deeds cannot be free from anxiety; A person who has not made peace with his own past cannot find the peace which God says defies all comprehension.

Yet Paul states that peace is possible – anxiety can be given up, rejoicing can occur in all things at all times, and peace can guard our hearts if we surrender to Him, leaving our cares and troubles at His feet, trusting, as the old hymn says, “in His wise bestowment” (Day By Day). He speaks truth and because he speaks from experience, these truths are all the more powerful and meaningful to us today.

Paul has obviously been able to leave his sordid past behind and has learned how to press on toward the goal of eternal life in Christ. The nuts and bolts of how he was able to make such a 180 degree turnaround in behavior is not clear for we have many years of his life that are not recorded. But he leaves enough behind in his writings for us to glean insight as to his methods and to make some applications to our own lives.

The first thing we know about Paul is that his conversion was dramatic. We know of no one else that has been thrown off their horse, blinded by the light of Jesus Christ, and instructed by Him to go and speak to kings, Jews and gentiles of the truth of the resurrection. Certainly something as dramatic as an encounter with the Risen Lord will change one’s perspective on what is real and what is just conjecture. And it absolutely places a stake in the ground as to when things changed and why they could no longer stay the same. Paul frequently refers to his Damascus Road experience as the pivotal moment in his life when speaking to rulers of nations.

So we could point to Paul’s dramatic conversion as something that may separate our conversion experience us from his. But I dare say some of us have had dramatic conversions as well. There may not have been an audible voice involved in our conversion but all of us have been thrown off our high horse as God convicted us of our sin, exposed our darkness, and shed His grace upon us.

Conversions do not have to be as dramatic as Paul’s to be real. But every believer has had a dramatic encounter with the Lord in their own way. And, like Paul, we have placed our own stake in the ground because it was from that encounter that our change sprang forth as well. Just as Paul spoke of his Damascus Road experience, we too speak of the time when God first entered our life and revealed His truth to us.

The second thing we know about Paul is that, besides having his eyes opened to the truth, he was given a task to do – to preach the gospel. He did not have to wonder what to do with his new knowledge. He was to share it with others no matter what their position in life. Some, like Paul, have heard the call of God to be an evangelist but not all of us have been called to that vocation. Yet all believers are called to tell others of Christ – to proclaim forgiveness for sin and cleansing from the past (Mark 16:5). So we are not that different from Paul after all.

Like Paul, we too have been exposed to the truth of Christ and are expected to spread this truth to a world of people chained to their past and weighed down by their sin. But if we are to be true proclaimers we must proclaim not only what we believe in words but also what we believe by deed – we must be able to live out the truths we speak so boldly about. For we cannot say we have been truly freed from our past if we allow the chains of darkness to keep us ensnared.

This changed life is what so infuriated the Jewish leaders about Paul. He did not simply speak eloquently about his conversion he lived it out. He ceased doing what he used to do and started doing

what He was told to do by the Lord Himself. People change their minds all the time but a consistently changed life is a strong testimony of a conversion that runs deeper than the surface. These conversions touch the heart and the mind which ultimately affects the will. A testimony lived is not easily refuted.

Paul's former desire was to harm those who believed in Jesus. This came to an abrupt halt on the road to Damascus. And Paul never looked back. Others may have questioned his conversion but Paul never did. Paul claims complete freedom from the past. He does not dwell on it, nor does he allow it to have any foothold in his life. He does not deny what he did or who he was, but rather acknowledges what God has done to make him into who he is now. His deeds now reflect his current understanding of God's grace and God's expectations, not his former beliefs. It was an act of his will but it was accomplished by the power of the Spirit.

For Paul, the thoughts and emotions of his heart had settled down but the events in his life never did. He was constantly persecuted, constantly on the move - by choice and by imprisonment - and continually challenged physically and provisionally. Because of the affliction that came to him in Asia he said that he and his companions were burdened excessively, beyond their strength, so that they despaired even of life itself (2 Corinthians 1:8). Yet he never wavered in his commitment, finding peace in the midst of it all. As we will learn in a few weeks he even learned to be content in whatever circumstance he found himself in.

Some of us can relate to Paul's constant upheavals, because, though not as severe as Paul, we too have experienced the ups and downs of life. It is when we look at Paul's sense of peace and lack of anxiety that we want to know how he was able to find such strength of character, such hope, such perseverance in the midst of his ordeals.

So far he has revealed these three things: He makes a habit of forgetting what lies behind him and presses on to what lies ahead. He rejoices in the Lord always for his cleansing from the past and his hope for the future. He does not experience anxiety because he lets God know of his needs through prayer and supplication. These three things bring the peace of God to the forefront even in the midst of great difficulties. And the peace he experiences guards his heart and mind in the Lord.

There are a few more things which Paul wants to share with us about his journey from the false to the true faith and what he has learned about staying the course and running the race with perseverance (Hebrews 12:1). And we will be taking a look at these over the course of the next several weeks. But today I want to finish the point of forgetting what lies behind in our past and moving on – to stop dwelling in places where our minds and emotions carry us almost against our will. I say “almost” because it seems they have a will of their own. But every believer in Christ has a stronger Presence living in them than the presence of the memories and emotions tied to past events. With the Spirit's help we can find healing from the past and the strength to choose where we allow our thoughts to dwell.

There is one final point needs to be made and that is this. In order to be at peace with the past so that we can forget about what lies behind us we have to fully accept the forgiveness and cleansing which God offers us. If we harbor any doubts as to what God is able to do or has already done for us then we continue to have a foothold in the past. If the shame that resulted from past actions continues to cling to us bringing forth decades of humiliation then we have yet not completely released the past. Intellectually knowing that God forgives is but step one on the journey toward forgiveness. Step two is embracing that forgiveness and letting go of the shame associated with the evil we have experienced.

There have been points in my life when I realized that I had intellectually assented to God's forgiveness but I was still emotionally clinging to the shame. I had let the event go but had not released its impact on me. I was still captive to it. So I had to revisit the place where the shame first occurred and ask God to help me release all of the sin to Him so that I could be completely cleansed. I no longer wanted any part of the shame to linger.

Whether I held on to the shame because I felt unworthy of God's love or because I felt I needed to pay for my sin I don't know. All I knew was that the shame still lingered. And I needed it to be gone. I was tired of travelling down the same worn out road and ending back at the same old shameful destination. I needed to move forward and stop looking back. I needed my eyes focused on what lay ahead of me and not on what lay behind me.

If you are like me and have come to the point of wanting to release the shame that still clings to you then pray this prayer with me now. This is a silent prayer because it is between you and God. No one else needs to know. But if you want release you must ask for it. So if you are willing, let's ask God now for the help in releasing that shame.

Father God, in the name of Jesus I come to you weighed down with shame. I am tired of carrying and covering up this burden which has been weighing me down for years. I am ready to release it to you now. Come, Lord Jesus, in the fullness of your grace and mercy and take this shame away. I have confessed my sin but I have allowed a piece of it to still linger in my heart. Faithful Lord, who forgives our sins, cleanse me from all the unrighteous shame that still clings to me. I give it to you now. Take it, nail it to the cross, cover it with your blood and bury it in the grave. Then let me rise to newness of life with You. May this day be the beginning of a life free of shame and full of hope; a life unshackled by the past, unrestricted in the present and unleashed for the future. I ask all these things in the mighty name of Jesus who made this promise to each of us, "Come to Me, all you who are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." Thank You, Lord for this rest from shame. Amen.

If you want to talk to someone about what you may have experienced this morning Wendy and I are available to you. But we respect your privacy; Even if we do not hear from you we trust that God has done the work that you have asked Him to do; if not today then soon; For God is a Redeemer of the past and a Provider of the future, and He is faithful to His promises. Amen.

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