

## DWELLING PLACES – Part Three

### The Book of Philippians #35

For the past two weeks we have spoken of the unhealthy thoughts that we allow our minds to dwell on and the unbelief we carry with us that prevents us from moving forward in our Christian life. We addressed the dwelling places that cause us harm by first asking the Lord to release the pain and shame of past evil deeds – both those we committed and those that were perpetrated upon us. Then we looked at the unbelief we carried that allowed us to mistrust or doubt God's provision for us particularly in the areas of cleansing from sin and the reality of a new life in Christ. We looked at these things as Paul looked at them, from the position of experience and understanding.

Paul understood where the natural mind of man goes when unaided by the Spirit of God and that's why he tells us that our minds must be transformed in order to stop dwelling on the thoughts of this world and start dwelling on the thoughts of heaven (Romans 12:2). As part of this renewal process Paul gave us a list of things to dwell on as replacements for the thoughts that call us away from God.

#### PHILIPPIANS 4:8

*“Finally, brother, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”*

Paul had first-hand experience of how the thoughts of the mind can be trained to cease dwelling on sinful thoughts and begin to dwell on things that are pure and righteous. But the changing of his thought life was only part of the process of his renewal. There were other things he did which laid the foundation for his transformation from the false to the true.

He first chose to leave his past behind, believing that Christ had completely forgiven and cleansed him from it. He was then able to rejoice in tribulation, pray without ceasing, leave His anxiety in the hands of the Lord, and experience the peace which only comes from complete trust. He did not allow his mind to be stuck on reruns because the Lord was creating new stories of life and peace for him. As he turned his mind from the lies of the past to the truth of the present, his thoughts began to tune themselves to whatever was true, whatever was honorable, whatever was right, pure, and lovely, and whatever was of good repute. If there was anything of excellence and anything worthy of praise he set his mind to dwell on these things.

The influence of the Word of God did not stop at Paul's salvation. It continued to penetrate every aspect of his life as he grew in the grace and knowledge of God (Hebrews 4:12). By allowing the Word of God to penetrate his past, he was set free of the things that held him in restriction. This in turn propelled him into the future that God had planned for him; a future full of mercy, grace, and truth, unshackled by sins of the past or previous errors in judgment.

As Paul begins to conclude his letter to the Philippian church he finishes his instructions for spiritual renewal by saying this:

#### PHILIPPIANS 4:9

*“The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”*

This may seem a little confusing at first because Paul has already stated in verses six and seven that the peace of God would be with us when we let our requests be made known to God through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. Yet here in verse nine Paul seems to be putting one last stipulation on receiving the peace of God; and that is putting these concepts into practice.

We can attempt to implement the things which Paul has told us to do but if we do not persevere in them, if we do not make a practice of them, Paul says we will not experience the promised peace of God. We must make a habit of implementing all of the things which Paul has told us and shown us by example to do if we want to experience the peace which he promises can be ours. We can give lip service to the verse but if we don't follow through, if we don't make these traits a daily habit, Paul says we will not reap the promised reward. Let me use an illustration to explain more fully what he means.

When we start to learn an instrument we understand that we cannot become proficient overnight. It will take time and effort if we ever hope to do anything other than pound out a few clumsy notes. Even the most accomplished pianist starts with the basics – where to place their hands, how to play a scale, how to play more than one note at a time; how to play both left and right hands at the same time. They have to learn first how to translate a specific note on a page to a specific key on the piano before they can ever graduate to learning how to interpret the strange notations that give timing, pitch, volume and emotion to the musical notes printed on the page.

Except for child prodigies, I know of no accomplished pianist that was instantly successful and proficient when he first sat down to play. It took hours, days, months and even years of practice before he was able to sit down and play with ease and confidence. The desire to learn was strong at first as the joy of someday playing something beautiful was a strong motivation. Over time the struggle to overcome their inherent deficiencies became more difficult as discouragement set in, diminishing their motivation; but as they persevered they discovered that as long as they maintained their discipline of practice their skill level increased. And as their skill increased their original joy returned because they could see the goal for which they had struggled so hard to attain was within their reach. Soon, instead of dreading practice they embraced it because they saw the fruit of their labors being birthed in their hands and fingers, allowing them to play more accurately and with greater ease. Their discipline was beginning to pay off.

Most people who start to learn an instrument and quit do so because they either became discouraged and did not have someone to encourage them to learn that skill, or did not have the will to put in the amount of time needed to be proficient. A Christian who gets discouraged in the faith is not unlike the person trying to learn an instrument. When he is not instantly successful in living out the Christian life he feels like a failure and becomes unwilling to try again. But like those learning an instrument, living out the Christian faith takes practice and patience if you are to be successful.

Someone who desires to be proficient in the piano sets aside time daily to practice his scales, improve his skill, and to set his sights on the goal of being accomplished and proficient at his art. He will allow nothing to dissuade him from his task, for he knows with discipline he will accomplish his goal. He is not dissuaded from the goal simply because he has not already attained it. Rather he disciplines his mind and body to do what is needed in order to meet or exceed the goal he has set for himself.

A Christian practices the scales of life when he sets everything else aside and spends time disciplining his heart and mind to obey the will of the Father. He does not allow anything to dissuade him from his task, for he knows that continued discipline will result in an improved ability to resist sin, an increase in

his faith, and a strengthening of character that will allow him to endure whatever God sends his way.

Like the struggling pianist there will be times of discouragement and moments of frustration where it seems the ability to succeed in the endeavor is taking too long; where the effort being put in is not bringing the tangible success soon enough. After successfully being able to play Chop Sticks with two hands the discouraged pianist gets frustrated when he cannot proceed quickly enough to play Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" without losing the rhythm and the melody in a sea of fumbling fingers playing unwanted and unwritten notes.

In the same way, a newborn Christian gets frustrated when the sin which he has successfully overcome reappears and once again tempts him to leave the path of righteousness and come back to the path of destruction. The road that promised such freedom is suddenly filled with so much temptation. He thought he had progressed to being able to handle the more difficult areas of life but finds that he is suddenly back to Christianity 101. It is at this point that he makes his choice – to give up, give in, or get to work.

No accomplished pianist ever stopped believing that if he continued to practice he would become proficient. Yet many Christians stop practicing their faith because they believe that no amount of continued discipline will make any difference in their ability to successfully overcome the world. Those who believe this have had their eyes blinded by the enemy and as a result their faith has become diminished by their failures. Instead of overcoming they have been overcome because the very thing that will make them stronger is what they refuse to cultivate.

To believe that the Christian life will ever be free from temptation is to believe a lie. We know the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry but it didn't end there. The Scripture says, *"When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time."* What those opportune times were we are not told. But you can be sure the devil never stopped trying to tempt Jesus until that last opportune moment disappeared as Jesus took his last breath on the cross.

If the devil continued to look for opportune times to tempt Jesus you can be sure that he is still looking for opportune times to tempt us. What are our opportune times? They are our moments of weakness - when we get discouraged; when we are tempted again and again over the same things; when our expectations of God are not met; when our lack of willpower causes our strength to diminish and our desire for righteousness to wane; when people disappoint us and when we disappoint ourselves; when our belief system is being tested and when our trust is being shaken. It is at these moments of weakness that we are most vulnerable to the lies and temptations of Satan.

The moments of testing that each of us encounters is different and each of us is humbled by the Lord in different ways. But all are called to resist temptation and to persevere in the face of trials. Sometimes we come to what seems like the limit of our endurance. Yet Paul reminds us of the Lord and what He endured for our sake.

#### HEBREWS 12:3-4

*"...consider Him who has endured such hostility against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives...'*

*“Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”*

All of us feel weak and feeble at times in our lives. A sense of unworthiness, of being unlovable, of feeling alone and abandoned, of feeling frustrated with our lack of progress in the faith can overwhelm all of us at any time and cause us to question God and His word. But Paul tells us to strengthen these areas of weaknesses so that they do not become useless to us in our fight against sin. They are not to become excuses for abandoning the fight but rather opportunities for healing and restoration.

Contrary to what some have taught these moments of doubt and discouragement are common occurrences for believers. Paul tells us that though God has begun a good work in us and continues to perfect what He has begun, He will not complete it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6). So there will always be something within us that needs perfecting.

In our struggle against sin Paul tells us to look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2) Feeling abandoned? Even Jesus was abandoned by those he loved, forsaken even by the Father Himself for a moment as He took upon Himself the sins of the world (Matthew 27:46). Feeling overwhelmed by temptation? Jesus was also tempted, tired, and tested in all things so He understands and can sympathize with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15). Yet because he did not sin when He was tempted He is able to reveal to us the secret of overcoming temptation.

We know from James that each of us is tempted when we are carried away by our own lust. Then when our lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished it brings forth death. (James 1:14-15). Since Jesus was tempted but never sinned, His method of dealing with temptation - to prevent lust from carrying Him away from obedience to the Father - was to not allow lust any room to conceive. Let me explain what I mean by this statement.

From an early age Jesus sought after His heavenly Father and dedicated His life to knowing Him. At age twelve He was in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And as He grew the Scriptures say He *“kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men”* (Luke 2:46, 52). Jesus spent time alone with the Father asking and seeking the Father’s will, not only living out the Scriptures He quoted but fulfilling them as well.

Jesus knew what it was like to live a disciplined life. Like the struggling pianist he practiced the scales of righteousness daily so that He could master the art of playing the tune of God to those of us on earth. He made a habit of righteousness, disciplining His body to obey the Word of the Lord. As a result the devil had no foothold in Jesus (John 14:30) because there was no womb of sin within Him where lust could find a place to conceive.

Paul also knew what it was like to live a disciplined life. He says that he disciplined his body and made it his slave, so that, after he had preached to others, he himself would not be disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Through this life of discipline Paul learned not to dwell on the past but to leave it behind. He learned not to dwell on the trials of life but rather to rejoice in all things. He learned to not give in to anxiety but to pray with supplication and thanksgiving, giving his anxiety to God. And in his thought life he learned to dwell on things that were true and honorable, right and pure, lovely and of good repute and on anything that was excellent or worthy of praise. As a result of this practice he experienced the peace of

God.

Paul had many years to put into practice what he had learned. By the time Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians he was nearing the end of his life. He had been a believer for nearly 28 years and was probably going to be martyred by Nero within 4 years of this writing. He was not a new believer speaking off the top of his head to the believers in Philippi. He was a seasoned man of God, tested in the waters of persecution and tried in the fires of prison. Like Jesus, he learned obedience through the things which he suffered (Hebrews 5:8), understanding that God deals with us as sons and daughters; and sometimes sons and daughters need redirecting by the trials of life (Hebrews 12:7).

In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul tells us to be imitators of him, because He is imitating Christ. In other translations it says to follow Paul just as he follows Christ. If we are to follow what Paul tells us to do in Philippians 4:9 in order for the God of peace to be with us, then we cannot simply know what Scripture says we must put it into practice. The daily discipline of obedience is the practice of scales, starting simply but evolving into more complicated and complex notes as the practice of a disciplined life begins to show in perseverance, rejoicing, lack of anxiety and the thoughts of righteousness on which we choose to dwell.

Paul says that if we let our requests be made known to God through prayer and supplication the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7). This is a true statement. There is nothing false about it. Yet if we choose not to dwell on things which are pure and lovely, if we choose to not believe we can be cleansed from sin, if we choose to disregard God's promise of a spiritually resurrected life here and now, then no amount of prayer and supplication will bring about the peace which God has promised.

We cannot be dwelling on our sin and still expect the peace of God to rule in our hearts and minds. The two concepts are mutually exclusive. As Paul says, we must practice the things we have learned and received and heard and seen in him before the God of peace will be with us.

We must be disciplined and persevere in our training for righteousness if we are to experience the peace of God. If we continue the practice of disciplining our minds and bodies to embrace truth and forsake evil, our ability to play spiritual Chop Sticks today will eventually turn into the ability to play the Spirit filled "Flight of the Bumblebee" tomorrow.

When we practice the basic tenants of Christianity as taught and modeled by Jesus and Paul we have peace, because peace comes from obedience. When Paul said the peace of God would come as we gave our requests to God through prayer and supplication he was in essence saying, "Do what I do. When I am anxious over something I seek God and give Him my burdens. And when I do He gives me His peace." This was the discipline that he infused into his life. He made a pattern of praying out of obedience, out of love, and out of need.

Paul's thirty-two year journey from Damascus to Rome was filled with conversions and imprisonment, persecutions and miracles, disappointments and successes. Yet no matter what befell him he knew how to find peace in the midst of it all. And Paul calls all of us to experience the same peace he experienced by practicing the things we have learned and received and heard and seen in him.

It is a life of faith that brings the peace of God to bear in any and all circumstances. But it is a life of disciplined obedience which maintains it. And when the fruit of peace is maintained in our lives it



produces even more fruit. Next week we will take a look at the by-products that Paul experienced as a result of living a disciplined life.

As we close out our study on Dwelling Places let me leave you with this final reminder. The place in which we choose to let our minds dwell will determine the pattern and the direction of our lives. God has placed before us life and death, blessing and curse and we can choose to dwell on any of them. But the dwelling place where the children of God should reside is in the place where:

- The past has no influence on the present
- The grace of God is constantly being applied to our weakness
- The thoughts of our hearts revolve around the future God has planned for us.

These dwelling places are not available to those with undisciplined lives, whose thoughts are constantly shifting between belief and unbelief, who refuse to have their minds renewed and their thoughts redirected. These people cannot expect to receive any of the benefits of peace in their lives because they are double-minded, having one foot in the world of unbelief and one foot in the world of faith (James 1:6-8). A life of unstable thoughts is incapable of receiving the peace of God. But a life of disciplined thought is fertile soil in which peace can grow.

If you are caught between these two worlds there is hope. As the man whose son was in need of healing replied when Jesus asked him if he had faith, you too can cry out Lord, *"I do believe; help my unbelief"* (Mark 9:24). He answered this desperate man's plea by healing his son and restoring his health. He did not condemn this man for his little faith but rather did what needed to be done in order to grow his faith.

Jesus seeks after those who are in need of spiritual healing. And when He finds them He grants them newness of life. He will do the same for you. Come to Him, express your need for greater faith, and wait expectantly for your faith to grow.

But know this. According to Romans 10:17, faith comes from hearing and hearing comes from the word of God (Romans 10:17). So steeping yourself in God's word will begin the process. But faith grows best in an environment of obedience and trust. Allow God to convict you of the things you are struggling to believe, and open your mind to receive the Word which God has planted in your heart. Then prove yourself to be more than a hearer of the Word. Be a doer also by being obedient to what God has revealed to your mind and heart (James 1:22).

The lesson that Paul has taught us is that in order to receive the peace which God says is possible in the midst of our struggle against the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life (1 John 2:16), we must put into practice what we have learned. If we do this Paul promises that the God of peace will be with us and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will rule in us, guarding our hearts and minds against the evil one through the power of the risen Christ who dwells within us.

Beloved, we are the dwelling place of God. The Spirit of God has made His home within us (Romans 8:11). Let us behave in a way that allows the indwelling God to reveal Himself to the world through us. Let us manifest the God of peace to others that they too might experience the peace of God which comes from a mind set on God and not on the things of this world (Colossians 3:2).

Let us allow the place where God resides to be a place which dwells on the things that are true, honorable, right and pure, lovely and of good repute. If there is any excellence and if anything worthy or praise, let us dwell on these things. For when we make this our habit, as I have already said, the God of peace will be with us and the peace of God will rule over us.

*“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit... And may the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”* (Romans 15:13, 33)