

DENIAL AND DEVOTION

The Book of Philippians #23

We have just sung the hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” which speaks of raising an Ebenezer. This is reference to a story in the bible where Samuel took a stone and set it between the cities of Mizpah and Shen. He named this stone Ebenezer, saying, *‘Thus far the Lord has helped us’* (1 Samuel 7:12). Here is the backstory.

The Ark of God had been captured by the Philistines and returned after many plagues occurred among them. When it was returned to Israel it was placed in the house of Abinadab. It stayed in this home for 20 years. During this time the people of Israel strayed from the Lord and had grown weak militarily; But the Philistines had grown more powerful, frequently taking territory away from the Israelites.

Samuel called out to the people of Israel and promised if they would return to the Lord and forsake their idols God would deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. So they gathered at the place called Mizpah and dedicated themselves to the Lord once again, confessing their sins. When the Philistines heard this they went up to fight against Israel.

Though the Israelites were afraid, Samuel told them to cry out to the Lord for their deliverance. Because of their obedience the Lord routed the Philistines that day and Israel was victorious over them. After that the Philistines were subdued and no longer came within the border of Israel. That is why Samuel took a stone and set it up at the place of the Lord’s victory. He named the stone Ebenezer saying, *“Thus far the Lord has helped us.”*

The word Ebenezer simply means stone of help. Now obviously the stone did not help them. It had nothing to do with their victory over the Philistines. But it was a memorial of God’s victory and an object which would remind all who saw it that the Lord was God and it was He who fought for them.

This is not the only memorial stone mentioned in the Bible. Jacob set up a pillar of stone after the Lord appeared to him. He called that place Bethel, which means house of God (Genesis 35:14-15). Twice Joshua placed stones as memorials, once to mark the place where they crossed over the Jordan river on dry land, and the second to mark the covenant the people of Israel made to serve the Lord after he was gone (Joshua 4:9; 24:26).

So stones were used as visual memorials of God’s encounter with His people and their encounter with Him. When the song says, “Here I raise my Ebenezer” it is saying it is here that I place a memorial to God’s goodness and mercy in rescuing me from the life of sin and His promise to bring me into His kingdom to live forever with Him. In the song we are that stone. We are that living memorial of what God has done for us. We are raising ourselves up as a testament to what God has done in and for us.

Last week we talked about the desire of Paul to grow closer to the Lord and his willingness to give up everything in order to do so. He expressed a desire:

To Know Christ
To Know the Power of His Resurrection
To Know the Fellowship of His Sufferings
To Be Conformed To His Death

To Attain To The Resurrection Of The Dead

When Paul addresses his former life and his willingness to forsake it all in order to know Christ Paul is raising his Ebenezer. It is a figurative memorial stone of God's faithfulness to Him and His desire to know more of the God who rescues and saves. And when he says *'that I might attain to the resurrection of the dead'*, he is saying, as Samuel did, "Thus far the Lord has helped me. And I believe that by faith I will attain all of the promises God has made to me, including the resurrection of the dead." Paul's Ebenezer stone was his life. And he wanted his life to be a memorial of God's victory in his life and of God's faithfulness in calling many more to eternal life.

Paul was willing to give up everything he had attained and counted it as loss for the sake of knowing and experiencing these things. But he also recognized that, though these things were possible, he had not yet attained them.

PHILIPPIANS 3:7-16

"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection of the dead..."

"Not that I have already attained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: 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."

So, while Paul speaks of desiring to be conformed to the image of Christ, he also recognizes that he has not yet achieved it. Even so he is pressing on so that he might lay hold of it. Though he seeks to know Christ, he knows that his knowledge of Christ will be limited while here on earth. It will not be until he sees Him face to face that he will fully know Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:12

"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known."

The same is true of salvation. In Romans we are told that we have received salvation as a result of faith.

ROMANS 10:10

"For with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

But we are also told in 1 Peter that it will be revealed in full until His coming.

1 PETER 1:3-5

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused

us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

According to both Colossians and Ephesians the same power that raised Christ from the dead now dwells in us by faith (Romans 8:11) and has raised us up with Him.

COLOSSIANS 2:9-10a, 12 / EPHESIANS 2:6

“For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete...having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead...and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

But 1 Corinthians tells us that we will not fully know the power of His resurrection until our mortal bodies are raised from the grave, completely free from sin’s destruction and decay.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:51-57

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality...

“But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Though by faith we now possess eternal life and have already been raised with Christ from the dead, there is something far greater awaiting us in the future. What we have received by faith is a down payment on future rewards, earthly portions if you will, which contain promises of something far greater – a fullness and completeness that can only be found in heaven.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-5

“For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be clothed but to be unclothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.”

So while all believers are the current recipients of salvation and resurrection power through faith in Christ, there is a future when these gifts of grace will be experienced in their fullness. That is the day that all believers look forward to, when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and when He shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15). As the song says, “What a day of rejoicing that will be” (“When We All Get To Heaven”, 1898, public domain).

This present and future scenario is not unlike filling out an application and having to answer the question, “Do you own your home?” You’re in a quandary because, yes you do but no you don’t. You

aren't renting it but you don't fully own it yet because you're in the process of buying it but it won't be fully yours until the last payment is made. You press on toward the goal of owning it but you must continue to be faithful in making the payments, and you alone are responsible for the care and maintenance of your home while you occupy it.

The same holds true in regards to salvation and resurrection. You "own" your salvation and you are experiencing resurrection but these won't be fully yours until your last breath is breathed here on earth. There is a future fulfillment of what you already have. You will someday fully "own" what has been freely given to you by Christ through faith. That is why Paul says,

PHILIPPIANS 3:12

"Not that I have already attained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus."

Paul states that he desires to lay hold of that for which also he was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Other translations read *"I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own"* or *"I press forward to capture it, inasmuch as I have been captured by Christ."*

In all these translations he is comparing that for which he is striving with that which Christ has already done for Him. So what does Paul mean when he says he was *"laid hold of by Christ"*, *"Christ Jesus has made me His own"* and *"I have been captured by Christ"*? What has Christ already done for Paul and how can Paul lay hold of it himself?

Christ has "laid hold" of Paul in this way: He has paid the ransom for Paul, capturing him away from the world of sin and death and raising him up to newness of life, granting him unmerited salvation. Christ transferred Paul out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light. He has given Paul the Holy Spirit, a new path and new purpose in life, and given him the mind of Christ.

As a result Paul is attempting to put into practice all the grace he has received from Christ. He is using the Spirit of God to preach and to heal, and to proclaim the Truth in the midst of adversity; He is using his freedom to set others free, taking the new life which he has been given and living it out in word and deed. He is taking hold of that which has taken hold of him and making a mad dash to the finish line in hopes of pleasing Christ.

Paul recognized that he could not attain or lay hold of perfection while still in his mortal body. But at the same time he recognized that it was a goal worth shooting for, and something that God calls all of us to strive toward. For God Himself said, *"You shall be holy for I am holy"* (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Paul was willing to leave behind his striving for righteousness through the Law which was manifested by his circumcision, being an Israelite and of the tribe of Benjamin, being a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, and a persecutor of the church; all qualifications for righteousness coming from the Law. But once Paul encountered the true righteousness found in Christ he willingly left all that behind, regarding it as garbage.

It's funny how you can believe a zirconium is a diamond until you place it beside a real diamond. That is when you see how flawed and inferior the false looks beside the genuine. And so it was with Christ and the Law. The Law was the path to salvation and as such was considered a flawless diamond to Paul. But when he placed it beside Christ the Law turned out to be only zirconium, a false path to

salvation. So he quickly embraced the true and discarded the false.

All of us cling to what we feel is important, either to keep us safe, keep us alive, or keep us protected. But if we ever come across something that will do a better job we will gladly give up the first for the superior second. Like Paul, we did this in our own pursuit of righteousness. We forsook our personal attempts to gain righteousness for Christ's willingness to impart righteousness to us through His own sacrifice and obedience. Like Paul, we too gave up striving for grace. We gave up the zirconium so that we could possess the diamond.

PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14

"Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: 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..."

All of us have a call from God to be holy, to sustain from sin, to be humble, to seek the face of God, to be in obedience to His will, and to follow the leading of His Spirit. But Paul had a specific call which dictated the direction of His life and his life's work. What was God's specific call to Paul? What did God require and empower Paul to do? Let's look at Scripture for the answer.

ACTS 9:10-16

"Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' And he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' And the Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight'..."

"But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake.'"

1 TIMOTHY 2:7

"For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth."

We can see by these verses that God called Paul to bear the name of Christ before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel and to suffer for His name's sake. God also appointed him a preacher and an apostle and a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

For Paul everything was black and white, cut and dried. You either did what the Law required or you did not. So it must have been very comforting to him to know exactly what the Lord called and required him to do. Most of us have not been called in such a dramatic way as Paul. We may all have been knocked off our high horse figuratively but he was kicked off his literally. He had a very real encounter with the Lord, hearing His voice, feeling His punishment, physically experiencing His mercy. And He was given specific instructions as to what the Lord wanted and expected him to do (Acts 9:3-18).

But what about us, how can we know the call God has on our lives? Do we need as dramatic an encounter as Paul had in order to know what the Lord has called us to do? No, but I bet all of us had some sort of drama occur when we turned from our sin and accepted the Lord. Somehow we too heard His

voice. Maybe not coming from the sky as Paul did, but coming from a friend, a priest, a preacher, or even from the Bible. When we encountered truth we too stopped doing what we were in the middle of doing and started following a different path. And we too had believers coming to us and explaining what God required.

What God called Paul to do He communicated to him personally, then through another believer, and finally through the revelation of hidden truth in His word. And He does the same for us. Let's see what Scripture has to say about what God has called all of us to do and be.

Paul called himself a bond-servant of Christ. Originally the lowest term on the scale of servitude, the term bond-servant also came to mean "one who gives himself up to the will of another; devoted to the point of disregarding one's own interests". Earlier in Philippians we read that Jesus emptied Himself and took on the form of a bond-servant of God.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8

"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Like both Jesus and Paul, all of us are called to be bond-servants, denying the desires of our flesh and devoting ourselves to the will of God. Denial and Devotion are at the heart of being a bond-servant.

At the point of conversion Paul ceased to devote himself to his own endeavors and started on a journey of devotion to Christ – to do His will, to disregard his own interest and to place the interest and will of Christ above all. As fellow bond-servants of Christ we are to do the same. Here are some general and overarching concepts of how to deny ourselves and to devote ourselves to Christ.

ROMANS 6:12-14

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace."

If we did nothing else but apply this principle in our everyday lives we would be successful, for it contains both the denial and the devotion. We are to deny sin its power source. We are to stop allowing sin to use the members of our bodies as instruments of evil. Instead we are to yield to the righteousness of God and devote ourselves to the will of God. But God gives us some specific examples of just how to do that.

EPHESIANS 4:31

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."

ROMANS 13:13-14

"Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and

make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.”

JAMES 1:19b-21

“But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.”

Jesus paid the price for our redemption so that we could cease being unwilling servants of Satan and become willing bond-servants of Christ. The key to all of this is the Holy Spirit, to obey His prompting and rely on His power so that we might overcome evil and to do good.

GALATIANS 5:16-25

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God...”

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

The Scriptures are full of dos and don'ts, of how to deny your will and devote yourself to God's will. I gave these few examples so that you will recognize others as you read His word and seek to devote yourself to it. Each time you come across a spiritual direction for your life with its practical application of denial, pay attention. This is what a bond-servant does. He seeks to know what the will of his master is so that he may quickly comply and thereby please his master.

We seek to be perfect servants of God. But if you are like me you know that perfect obedience and perfect submission have yet to be achieved. Paul knew this as well. He knew that he had not yet become a perfect servant. But in spite of this and in pursuit of perfection he says he does do one thing – he reaches forward to what lies ahead. He does this by forgetting what lies behind him.

This may be the biggest key to understanding how Paul was able to do all that he did for Christ; How he was able to suffer so greatly while rejoicing in the midst of it; How he was able to loosen the Law's hold on Him in order to pursue the fullness of grace that Christ bestowed upon him; How he was able to successfully run the race that was set before him; And how he willingly denied himself in order to fully devote himself to the will and purpose of God. But we will not look at this today. We will save this for next week because it is a subject which deserves its own sermon.

Between now and then remember these two words – denial and devotion. As you go through this week and decisions are being made ask yourself if you are making your decisions based on your will or God's will. If you cannot determine that then ask yourself what you are willing to do. If you are willing to deny yourself and devote yourself to God's will then ask for clarification of His will and His help in doing it. If you find yourself unwilling to surrender then ask Him for His conviction so that you might repent and obtain His forgiveness. As the Scriptures say,

MATTHEW 6:24

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

We used to serve another master. Born into sin we were slaves to sin. But now we are slaves of righteousness, bought with the precious blood of Christ.

In the modern hymn written by Stuart Townend entitled “In Christ Alone” we find these very descriptive words of our victory in Christ:

*There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again*

*And as He stands in victory
Sin’s curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ*

(“In Christ Alone”, Words by Stuart Townend, Music by Keith Getty, © 2001 Kingsway’s Thankyou Music, Administered by EMI Christian Music Publishing, CCLI #829565)

In 1 Corinthians 6 we read the following:

1 CORINTHIANS 6:20

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

The basic duty of a bond-servant is to glorify God in their body. How this works out for each is individual in its nature but universal in its application. Some who struggle with alcohol will have to deny themselves this vice. Those who do not struggle with this demon do not concern themselves with this particular denial. But they must still deny themselves whatever pleasure seeks to rule over them. No matter what the sin is that so easily entangles you (Hebrews 12:1) it has the same solution and path to victory of any other sin - denial of self and devotion to Christ.

Denial and Devotion - these are the words to remember this week.