

True Spirituality:

The Transforming Power of the Gospel

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In the preface to his book, True Spirituality, the late Christian leader and author Francis Schaeffer referred to a problem that led him to a point of great spiritual crisis in his life. He called it the “problem of reality” (1971:i). After being in the gospel ministry for many years, he said the problem came to him in two parts.

First, he observed that among many of those who had fought hard to uphold orthodox theology in his generation, he saw lots of correct doctrine, but very little true spiritual reality.

Second, as he dared to take an inside look at his own heart, he had to admit that although he had all the doctrines and ministry activities down quite well, he, too, seemed to be experiencing little or no true spiritual transformation. Schaeffer came to realize that true spirituality is not only a matter of the mind and will; it also a matter of the heart.

It’s a painfully common story. The heart passion we once had for God has somehow grown cold. Even though we may keep learning truths and practicing spiritual disciplines, we sense something is wrong, but we’re not sure what it is. If we are able to take an honest inside look, many of us have to admit that there is very little true spirituality.

The frightening thing is that we can have lots of good theology and even remarkable “ministry success,” but still have very little true spirituality. There are certain warning signs to which we always need to pay close attention, things like a weak prayer life, frequent struggles with feeling slighted by others, often being critical of other people and ministries, recurring

bouts of self-pity, as well as anxiety and joylessness in both your life and work (Keller 1999:58).

The problem is you can have these kinds of internal struggles and still have significant external ministry success. If this is the case, you must know you are probably doomed to a shallow life and an eventual breakdown. The long-term impact of your life and ministry for Christ and His kingdom is in question. When the apostle Paul faced these kinds of problems in his day, he dared to pose the question, “What happened to all your joy?” (Gal 4:15).

I’m concerned that we have unknowingly lowered the biblical standard of transformation and accepted as normative a level of experience and change that God never meant for us to accept. What is the remedy to the spiritual coldness and hardness of our hearts? How are we to respond to the lack of authentic joy and power in our lives?

Three Counterfeit Remedies

Before we look into God’s Word to see what to do, let us first be clear about what not to do. I want to encourage you to be on your guard against three counterfeit remedies.

Intellectualism

The intellectualist reduces Christianity to a set of doctrinal beliefs you simply need to affirm with your mind. The focus of the intellectualist is on the mind, not the heart. Such a person believes that spiritual transformation is nice, but it is optional. His

response to the lack of spiritual transformation in the life of a Christian is often to justify it, to say “Don’t worry about it.” His creed is: “Freed from the law, O blessed condition, I can sin as I please, And still have remission!” The only thing that is really important to the intellectualist is what you believe.

In Edwards’ work, Religious Affections, he presents us with a radically different perspective. “To Edwards, the heart of the matter was always a matter of the heart” (Childers 1995:7). Edwards was deeply burdened for those in his day whose minds were filled with correct theological beliefs but had a mere external form of godliness, one that had very little transforming power. He writes, “[H]e that has doctrinal knowledge and speculation only, without affection, never is engaged in the business of religion” (1984, I:238).

Edwards teaches that true spirituality is always powerful, and its power first appears in a transformed heart. When describing the difference between a Christianity of the mind and one of the heart he writes, “There is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace . . . just as there is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet and having a sense of its sweetness” (1984, II:14). He makes the point that there is a big difference between simply knowing that the Lord is good and obeying God’s command in the Bible “to taste and see that the Lord is good” (1984, II:14).

J.I. Packer drives home this same point to our generation when he writes in his contemporary classic, Knowing God, “A little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about Him” (1973:21).

Passivism

A second counterfeit remedy we must avoid is what we will call passivism or emotionalism. The inordinate focus of the passivist is on the emotions. The passivist believes that he can make no real contribution to his spiritual transformation except to relinquish control of his life to God. The way the passivist believes he must deal with his unchanged heart is just to “let go and let God.”

Passivism teaches that the Christian’s secret of a happy life is to “let Jesus live His life through you” or have a spiritual experience that will somehow catapult you into a higher or deeper plane of spiritual maturity. This understanding of the Christian life can easily lead you to spend your entire life chasing one false hope or experience after another in search of “something more” to make your faith more fulfilling. The result is almost always an ankle-deep emotionalism.

The Bible teaches that God has made us in his image with a “trinity of faculties” (Owen 1976, VI:213, 216, 254, VII:397) which include the mind, the will, and the heart or the affections. Our emotions play a very important role in that human heart. The heart is presented in Scripture as the very core of our being, the seat of our mind, will, and emotions. However, the human heart is not portrayed in Scripture as being the same thing as the emotions.

In fact, Edwards’ word for what we now call emotions is actually “animal instincts” (1984, I:245-261). While we must learn to affirm the legitimacy of human emotions in our worship and walk with the Lord,

we must be cautious to avoid the error of the passivist, allowing our emotions to have an inordinate influence on our walk with God.

Moralism

The third, and probably the most dangerous, counterfeit remedy we must reject is moralism. The moralist does not focus his attention on the mind or emotions, but rather on the will. The moralist’s motto is “Just try harder!” Just try harder to spend more time in Bible reading, meditation and prayer. Just try harder not to be angry or not to worry, not to lust. Just try harder to be a better witness, a more loving spouse, or a better parent.

The problem with this approach is that a believer can hear only so many pulpit pep talks on trying harder before he finds himself lapsing into either denial, despair, or worst of all, the adoption of evangelical self-help plans and programs by which he thinks he really is going to change himself, if he just keeps trying harder.

This is a very old and very dangerous teaching. It’s the gospel of works righteousness. It is the strong proclamation of justification by grace through faith alone, quickly followed up by the subtle teaching that your Christian growth is going to be achieved primarily through the power of your own flesh. In Galatians, Paul addresses a group of first-century moralists with strong words. In Galatians 3:3 he writes, “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?”

To Paul the error of the moralist is no small matter. Paul saw such a position as a direct attack on the very nature of the gospel itself. What is missing in the message of the moralist, as well as the message of the passivist and the nominalist, is the cross--the transforming power of the gospel.

So where can we learn the proper way that God means for our hearts to be transformed into the image of Christ? What is the answer to Schaeffer’s earlier stated “problem of reality?” Schaeffer gives us a glimpse into the biblical solution by writing about the results of his search for greater spiritual reality.

“I searched through what the Bible said concerning reality as a Christian. Gradually I saw that the problem was that with all the teaching I had received after I was a Christian, I had heard very little about what the Bible says about the meaning of the finished work of Christ for our present lives” (1971:ii).

To Schaeffer the essence of true spirituality must be linked to the ongoing appropriation of the work of Christ to the Christian.

He writes, “Because of any of these ignorances, the Christian may not “possess his possessions” in this present life. But when a man does learn the meaning of the work of Christ in the present life, a new door is open to him. And this new door then seems to be so wonderful that often it gives the Christian, as he begins to act upon the knowledge of faith, the sense of something that is as new as was his conversion” (1971:84).

To understand better what it means to be transformed by the power of the gospel, two simple questions must be asked and answered: 1) “What is this gospel?” and 2) “How does this gospel change our lives?”

What is the Gospel?

In seeking an answer from Scripture concerning this question, I invite you to revisit the simple but deeply profound words that Jesus used to begin His public ministry in Mark 1:14b-15. “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and

the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Good News of a Kingdom

In these verses we find that Jesus begins His public ministry by announcing the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand. To his original Jewish listeners this was an especially meaningful announcement. The Old Testament prophets foretold the day when a great Messiah King would come and deliver them from their oppression. As Jesus made this announcement, the Jews had been greatly oppressed by the Roman government for many years. They longed for Messiah to come, set up His kingdom, and save them from their oppression (Ridderbos 1975:48).

However, the Jews soon learned that the kingdom Jesus was inaugurating was not what they expected. The nature of the kingdom was more spiritual than political, as was the oppression from which Jesus came to deliver His people. They would later learn that the enemies this king came to engage in battle were not political enemies, but spiritual enemies.

The Bible calls these enemies the world, the flesh, the devil, and even death itself. As king, Jesus came to wage war with these spiritual enemies in order to set his people free from their captivity.

Although Jesus as king was fully present at this time, note that verse fourteen shows us that the kingdom “was near.” This means the kingdom was not yet fully in their midst. Jesus was beginning to set in motion all that would eventually bring about the universal rule and reign of God over not just Rome, but over all the nations of the earth.

Centuries earlier, God made very clear through the prophets that the ultimate goal of this coming kingdom was that God would be

glorified, worshipped, and enjoyed by a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation of the earth. However, there were certain critical events that had to take place during this time in history for this kingdom to come in its fullness.

Good News of a King

First, the king had to come. Approximately thirty years before Jesus made this announcement, he, as the eternal Son of God, broke into human history and took on humanity (Jn 1:1-14). That is good news, but the good news is about more than his birth.

The Scriptures also tell us the good news of his life. From infancy Jesus entered into personal battle with every spiritual enemy that had defeated his people and held them captive. As a warrior-king, he lived the life we should have lived. He faced every temptation known to man from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The good news is that, unlike you and me, he never sinned. In so doing he earned a perfect righteousness before God, completely obeying all of God’s commands in thought, word, and deed.

However, the good news is more than about his birth and life.

The good news is that as our king, Jesus offered himself up as more than our life substitute. He also became our substitute in death. When he died on the cross, he did not simply experience the pain of physical suffering and death. He also suffered the full wrath and punishment of God that we deserve because of our sin.

The Bible says, “[T]he Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:6). The good news is that he not only lived the life we should have lived, he also died the death we deserved to die. However, the good news is about even more than his birth, life, and death.

The good news is also that God raised him from the dead and has now seated him on the throne of heaven and thereby given him the sole authority and power to deliver his people from sin’s captivity.

Because of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection almost two thousand years ago, God has now made him Savior and Lord. Therefore Jesus’ lordship must be seen as a direct result of His death and resurrection.

When the apostle Peter first preached the good news, he said that Jesus had been “raised from the dead and . . . exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:32-33).

This symbolic statement that Jesus is now at the right hand of God is meant to teach us that Jesus is presently reigning and ruling in heaven as both Savior and Lord.

As Savior, he alone has the authority and power to deliver people from sin’s penalty and power over their lives.

As Lord, he alone has the authority to demand that everyone, everywhere, submit to his rule over their lives (Acts 17:30).

The apostle Paul said, “[N]ow he [God] commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (Acts 17:31).

The good news is that this exalted Christ is coming again (Matt 24:30; 25:19, 31; 26:64; John 14:3), and he is going to bring all things under his rule.

When he comes again, it will not be like the first time, as a humble, suffering servant. He will return as a sovereign king, executing judgment and establishing righteousness in all the earth.

Paul writes, “[A]t the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

Good News of Pardon and Power

The climax of this good news is not simply that Jesus is Savior and Lord, but that as Savior and Lord he has made certain promises to all who believe in him and submit to him. These gospel promises include not only God's promise to save us from sin's penalty, but also God's promise to save us from sin's domineering power over our lives.

It is the good news that Jesus Christ not only died two thousand years ago to deliver us from sin's penalty, but he also lives today to deliver us from sin's reigning power. Mankind's fundamental spiritual problem is not simply a status problem, but also a human nature problem.

When we are outside of Christ, we are not only guilty before the heavenly court. We are also standing there morally corrupt, with a terminal disease called sin. Therefore, we need not only a new status before God, but also a new nature.

This is why Peter concluded his first sermon at Pentecost by promising his listeners two free gifts from God to all who would turn to Christ: 1) the forgiveness of sins and 2) the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). The good news is not only that our status can be changed before God the Judge but also that our corrupt nature can be healed by God the Physician. The Psalmist praises God for both benefits when he writes, "He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases" (Ps 103:3).

Good News for the Lost and Found

Therefore, the gospel message should be seen as not only a message of good news for lost people to be saved from sin's penalty, but also as a message of good news for Christian people to be

saved from sin's domineering power. The goal of the gospel is not merely to forgive us, but to change us into true worshippers of God and authentic lovers of people.

We often reduce the gospel to "God's plan of salvation" for lost people to be saved from sin's penalty, not realizing that it is also "God's plan of salvation" for Christians to be saved from sin's power. The same gospel message that saves sinners also sanctifies saints.

A few years ago, a major leader in the Navigators ministry revealed to a gathering of hundreds of Christians that he had discovered his own view of the gospel had been truncated for most of his ministry.

He said, "Imagine drawing a time line of your life. A dot on the extreme left represents your birth; a dot on the extreme right represents your death. Picture a cross in the center, signifying your conversion. What one word would summarize your greatest need from birth to conversion?" Most of the group replied, "The gospel."

He continued, "Now give me just one word summarizing your greatest need from your conversion to your death." Some said growth, others said sanctification.

The leader confessed that for most of his ministry he would have agreed with those choices. Being a Navigator, he said his choice would probably have been "discipleship". "But today," he confessed, "that word would be 'gospel.'" After decades of active discipleship, he realized that his view of the gospel had been virtually disconnected from living the Christian life. Now he is convinced that the gospel is needed just as much after conversion as it is before (Childers 1995:6).

So the gospel is not just the ABC's but the A to Z of Christianity (Keller 1999:36). The gospel is not just a gate we pass through one time but a path we are to walk each day of our

lives. This gospel is God's solution not merely to our guilt, but also our moral corruption—as well as the ultimate solution to all the problems of life both personal and social. The gospel is not merely a set of propositions to be believed and defended, but it is also a supernatural power to be released in and through our lives and churches for a broken world.

So the question arises, "How can I be transformed by this power of the gospel?"

How Does the Gospel Change a Christian?

Notice again the simple, but deeply profound, words of Jesus found in Mark 1:14b-15. "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'"

Repentance and faith have been called the two dynamics of a "spiritual combustion cycle" that God means to be at work in our hearts at all times, changing us into the image of his Son. In order for us to experience the transforming power of the gospel in our lives, we must continually be repenting and believing in the gospel.

When this "spiritual combustion cycle" of ongoing repentance and faith is at work in the heart, there will be change. The reverse is also true. When there is no true change in the heart and life, it is certain that this cycle of ongoing repentance and faith is not taking place. Since these two dynamics of repentance and faith are so misunderstood, yet so critical for spiritual transformation, we will now take a closer look at each one in more detail.

Repentance: Turning Heart Affections Away From Idols

There is a lot of confusion today about repentance. Many people see repentance as morbid self-flagellation, leading the repenter into despair. Repentance is seen as a kind of evangelical penance reserved only for those special times when you've been really bad and need to humble yourself before God.

This view of repentance reflects how so few Christians today seem to have grasped the first thesis of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, which he nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church, giving birth to the Protestant Reformation. In the first thesis, Luther writes, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (1957:25).

This understanding of repentance as an ongoing, way-of-life experience for the believer seems to be almost unknown today. What we must rediscover is that true repentance does not lead us to despair but to joy. The more we learn to see the depth of our sin, the more we'll see the depth of God's grace. The cross of Christ is only deeply precious, it is only "electric," to daily repenters who see the depth of their sin.

When Jesus calls us to repent, he is not calling us to beat up on ourselves or merely to clean up our lives. Instead, he is calling us to a radical change of heart. According to Scripture our root problem is not an external, behavioral problem--it's a problem of the heart. This is why all the counterfeit remedies inevitably leave us unchanged and in either denial or despair, because they all bypass the heart.

The reason our hearts are not more transformed is because we have allowed what the Puritans call "the affections of our hearts" to be

captured by idols that steal our heart affection away from God. The apostle John makes this point in the very last verse of 1 John.

Here the apostle purposefully concludes his masterful 105-verse letter on how to live in vital fellowship with Christ with these words, "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn 5:21). Here we learn that repenting of our idolatry actually sums up what true spirituality really is.

Because God has created man to be a worshipper, we are always worshipping something, whether we realize it or not. This is why we should always see the essential character of our sin as heart idolatry.

The first and second commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3) and "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Ex 20:4a), are meant to remind us of the very dangerous and natural tendency we all have to worship idols.

The modern idols that capture our hearts' affection today are not the graven images of the ancient world. An idol is something from which we get our identity. An idol is making something or someone other than Jesus Christ our true source of happiness or fulfillment.

It has been said that Rocky Balboa revealed one of the idols of his heart in the best line of the famous "Rocky" movie, when he said, "If I can just go the distance, then I'll know I'm not a bum."

The truth is everyone has something or someone we can easily put in that place. "If I can only have--you fill in the blank--then I'll know I'm somebody."

We all have to live for something. We all have a "personal center," an ultimate value through which we see all of life (Keller 1998:46).

For some of us it is approval, reputation, or success. For others it is comfort or control, pleasure or power. For some it is possessions or sex or money or a relationship. Idols

can be good causes such as making an impact, having a happy home or a good marriage or obedient children. Whatever it is, without this bottom line we believe our lives are meaningless.

Whatever we live for has great power over us. If someone blocks our idol from us, we can be enraged with anger. If our idols are threatened, we can be paralyzed with fear. If we lose our idol, we can be driven into utter despair. That is because the idols we worship give us our sense of worth or righteousness.

When we allow the affections of our hearts to be captured by such idols, the outcome is always the same--a lack of God's transforming power and presence in our lives.

So repentance should not be seen as merely changing our external behavior but primarily as a willingness to pull our heart affections and our heart trust away from our idols. The great English theologian, Owen, teaches that one of the reasons we don't experience more of God's power and presence in our lives is because we have not sufficiently studied the idolatries of our own hearts. This is why we should learn to ask ourselves hard questions such as: "What is my greatest fear in life?" and "What other than Christ has taken title to my heart's functional trust?"

For years I confessed to God my recurring sin of anxiety that was destroying me physically. But I saw very little change until I began to see and repent of the internal sin of idolatry that was the root of the external sin of worry. To my surprise, I discovered that my core problem was not primarily the external sin of worry but the internal, idolatrous sin of seeking the approval of others as the source of my righteousness or worth.

The great evangelist, George Whitefield, taught that to know God's power, we must learn not only what it means to repent of our

sins but also to repent of our righteousness (1993). The late John Gerstner is reported to have said, “It is not so much our sins that keep us from God as our damnable good works.”

Once we have identified a heart idol, repentance involves not only confessing it, but also taking radical action against it, sapping the life-dominating power it has over us. In Romans 13:14 Paul writes, “[M]ake no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” All that is idolatrous to us must have its vivid appeal drained away. The Puritans call this mortification, a concept seldom heard today.

Repentance is only half of our responsibility in transformation. It’s the negative, defensive side of the equation. We turn now to the positive, offensive strategy--faith in the gospel.

Faith: Turning Heart Affections to Jesus Christ

The reason Jesus commands us in this text to “repent and believe the gospel” is because he knew that faith in the gospel is the mysterious means God ordains through which the power of his victory as our king is meant to flow in and through our lives and our churches. The good news of the kingdom is that our king has won a marvelous victory for us. Through his sinless life, sacrificial death as our substitute, resurrection, and ascension, he has not only conquered death for us, removing its penalty, but he has also conquered sin’s power over us.

As our warrior-king, he has entered into battle against all the enemy forces (the world, the flesh, and the devil) that wage war against our souls, and he has conquered their reigning power over us forever. Now, through repentance and faith, God means for us to tap into the powerful victory of our king, so that

we might be transformed into true worshippers of God and more authentic lovers of people.

The reason God calls us to pull our affections off our heart idols through repentance is so that we can place those same affections on Jesus Christ through faith. The apostle Paul has this positive side of the change equation in mind when he writes in Colossians 3:1-2, “[S]et your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

In Paul’s thought the process of gospel transformation always involves this ongoing, two-fold dynamic of repentance and faith. Through repentance we are always to be pulling our affections off of our idols. Through faith we are always to be placing our affections on Christ.

The Puritans describe this concept of setting our affections on Christ as developing spiritual-mindedness. They teach that we must be even more radical about setting our affections on Christ than we are about removing our affections from our idols. As we think of the proper priority of our focus, Robert Murray McCheyne puts it well when he says, “Do not take up your time so much with studying your own heart as with studying Christ’s heart. ‘For one look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ’” (1947:93).

In Galatians 6:14, Paul gives us a fascinating glimpse into how his faith in the gospel transformed him when he writes, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.”

John Stott writes, “Paul’s whole world was in orbit around the cross. It filled his vision, illumined his life, warmed his spirit. He “gloried” in it. It meant more to him than anything else. . . . This Greek word translated here as “boast” has no exact equivalent in English. It means to

glory in, trust in, rejoice in, revel in, live for. In a word, our glory is our obsession” (1986:349).

Some of us are obsessed with gaining approval or recognition. Others are obsessed with experiencing comfort or pleasure or happiness. Some are obsessed with gaining control or power or possessions or building a reputation or gaining success as the world defines it. The apostle Paul was also obsessed. But his obsession was with Christ and the cross. In his obsession with the cross, Paul experienced the transforming power of the gospel to crucify the dominating power of his sinful nature and the idolatrous lure of the world.

Only when we learn how to glory in the cross and not in our idols will we ever experience the true liberating power of the gospel. Only when Jesus Christ becomes more attractive to us than the pleasures of sin will our hearts ever be set free. The enslaving power of sin will never dissipate until a greater affection of the heart replaces it. This is why we must learn to pray like the old hymn writer William Cowper: “The dearest idol I have known / Whate’er that idol be / Help me to tear it from Thy throne / And worship only Thee” (1990:534).

Obedience: Nurturing Faith by the Means of Grace

There is a strong link between our obedience to God’s will and our personal experience of God’s ministry power. Jesus says, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14:23). He also says, “If anyone wishes to come

after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mk 8:34-35).

God means for our radical obedience to his will and his purposes in the world to be a vital part of our experience of truly knowing him and experiencing his power in and through our lives. God loves to pour out his Spirit with power on those individuals and churches who will dare to align themselves radically and joyfully with his will for their lives and for his world.

God's primary plan by which he means for us to nurture our union with Christ is through the devoted use of the means of grace he provides. The book of Acts shows us that the early Christians devoted themselves to "the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42b).

Paul establishes the primacy of the church in leading Christians to spiritual maturity when he writes, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:11-13).

The Holy Spirit ordinarily does his work in our lives as we learn to fix our hearts and minds on the Lord Jesus Christ through the corporate means of grace. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer all which are

made effectual to the elect for salvation." (WSC 88).

Conclusion

To draw near to God in repentance and faith demands that we first humble ourselves. The Scriptures tell us that "God is opposed to the proud but he gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6). The paradox of grace is that the way up is the way down. God's grace and power, like water, always flow down to the lowest place--the foot of the cross. The cross has been called the sinner's place.

It is at the cross that we cast away all our pride and self-sufficiency and admit to God what idolaters we really are. It is at the cross that we stop covering up our lack of spiritual reality. It is at the cross that we humbly admit to God that our hearts are spiritually cold and hard. It is at the cross that we find rest for our souls. I am not presenting just one more plan or program for spiritual self-development. Instead, I am presenting a person, Jesus Christ, who says not only "repent and believe the gospel" (Mk 1:14b-15), but also "'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28-30).

The good news is that in Jesus Christ we finally find what our hearts truly long for and thirst after, that which our idols can promise only in vain. It is the good news that we do not have to live in fear of God's condemnation anymore. No matter how great our sins may be, God promises we can now be completely forgiven through Christ's shed blood in our place.

It is the good news that we do not need to be crippled by the fear of rejection anymore, always building and defending our reputation, for we can know the riches of God's eternal acceptance through Christ's perfect righteousness, counted to be ours through faith.

It is the good news that we don't need to go on living and feeling like unloved spiritual orphans anymore, for we can now know the comfort of Jesus Christ as our compassionate older brother, the one "who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin" (Heb 4:15).

It is the good news that, although we can grieve and displease God because of our sin, there is nothing we can do to cause our Heavenly Father to love us any less, and there is nothing we can do to cause him to love us any more. God's love for us in Christ is the same eternal love he has always had for his one and only Son. Because we are his children, God promises to use all the trials of our lives not for our punishment but for our good, to help us grow and mature to be all he designed us to be (Heb 12:10).

It is the good news that no matter how alone we may find ourselves in this life, no matter how many people may leave us, we can always know the intimate communion of God's Holy Spirit who promises never to leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5). His love for us is eternal; he chose us to be in Christ before the creation of the world, and he promises that the work he began in us, he will bring to completion on that final day in heaven (Phil 1:6). In the meantime, he promises to come alongside us to comfort, encourage and transform us through all our trials. He promises always to be near to the brokenhearted (Ps 34:18).

It is the good news that no matter how intense or enslaving our present struggle with sin may be, we no longer need to be in bondage to sin's dominion over our lives. Although sin's influence will always be with us, sin's dominion over our lives has been broken through the cross (Rom 6). It is the good news that we can now finally be free from that sin which has held us in bondage for so long.

It is the good news that one day all of our struggles will be over and God will bring us home to heaven. We are now pilgrims passing through a land that is not our own, on our way to our home, the Celestial City (Bunyan 1872a)--a place where God promises he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. He promises that he will make all things new. We will be made new in both soul and body. All creation will be made new. He promises that in the new heavens and the new earth there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will pass away (Rev 21:4).

As we begin to focus on these gospel promises from God, we must allow them to lead us to the person of Jesus Christ in worship. These rich gospel promises must now go from our minds to our hearts, until our hearts catch on fire with a renewed love and delight for God. How does that happen?

All God requires is that we draw near to him in repentance and faith through the cross of Jesus Christ. For it's here, at this low sinner's place, that God has chosen to lift us up and change us into the likeness of Christ. And so it is to the sinner's place I invite you to come.

One day, Jesus met a very thirsty woman at a well in Samaria. He knew that her thirst had driven her into the arms of many men over the years, yet she was still very thirsty. Jesus knew her thirst was far more than physical. Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will become...a spring of water welling up to everlasting life" (Jn 4:13-14).

Later, at a great Jewish feast, Jesus calls out to the crowd with a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (Jn 7:37-38).

By this, John tells us, Jesus meant the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' name, I now call you who are thirsty to turn away from your idols, from all your broken cisterns (Jer 2:13) and begin to drink deeply from the well that is Christ. This well never runs dry. Here are the springs of personal, church, and cultural transformation, reformation, and revival.

I promise you, on the authority of Jesus' words, that if you will keep coming to Christ in humble repentance and faith, you will not only have your deep thirst quenched, but streams of living water will flow mightily through you, not merely for your sake, but for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom.

As you respond, prayerfully meditate on the words of the nineteenth century hymn writer, Horatius Bonar, "I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give the living water. Thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live" (1990:304).

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