

ENTERING INTO A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

To most Christians, salvation opens the door to a new life of trying to follow the example set by Jesus in the gospels. To others, salvation is the starting point of a pilgrimage of spiritual growth in holiness that has as its goal being united with Christ in God. In Psalm 84, the psalmist declares that those who have set their hearts on such a pilgrimage are blessed by God.

**“Blessed is the man whose strength is in You,
Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baca
[weeping, or sorrow],
They make it a spring;
The rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
Each one appears before God in Zion.”** Ps 84:5-7

The psalmist starts by stating the necessary condition of a pilgrim’s heart – **“whose strength is in You.”** Strength here is not physical strength, but the capacity to do all things – in this case in reliance on God to be its source. Those on pilgrimage have abandoned self-reliance, and placed themselves in God’s hands to lead them every step of the way, meeting each need.

The psalm goes on to say that the pilgrim will **“pass through the Valley of Baca,”** or places of testing trials involving a measure of suffering, and ‘weeping,’ but God will turn them into ‘springs and pools’ or places of spiritual life and growth. It should be understood at the outset that the pilgrimage to fulfilment in Jesus Christ is one involving a degree of suffering and refinement, as former concepts of fulfilment in life through activities and possessions are stripped away, and replaced with the spiritual discernment of fulfilment through union with the Lord.

At the end of the spiritual pilgrimage, **“each one appears before God in Zion** [signifying God’s presence],” or the spiritual state of abiding in Christ in God.

EMBRACING THE INDWELLING PRESENCE OF THE LORD

Those who embark on pilgrimage in their own strength often fall prey to Satan’s attacks, and so it is important that we know the Lord personally, and are participants of life lived in union with Him.

The first essential in having a personal relationship with Jesus is to believe the many Scriptures that tell us that He dwells in us, and we in Him. E.g.

“...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts [figuratively: our thoughts and feelings] through faith...” Eph 3 16-17.

“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” John 14:23.

“But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.” Rom 8:9-10.

Secondly, we must believe the truth of Christ’s abiding presence in us personally, and His desire to impart His life to us, as He said, **“I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”** John 10:10.

True faith demands that we not only believe the truth, but receive and walk in the power of the life Christ wants to impart to us. Faith demands action, for if there is no following action, faith is dead. James said, **“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”** James 2:17. Faith demands that we walk, as if actually knowing the presence of His indwelling life, and drawing on it to meet our needs – His faith, His love, His strength, His humility, His patience, and so forth.

PRAYER IS A BASIC NECESSITY FOR A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Some people are reluctant to pray to anyone but God the Father, but how can two people have a personal relationship without conversing with one another? Jesus gave us many instructions that require us to turn to Him and pray directly to Him. E.g.:

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.” John 4:10.

“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Matt 11:28.

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.” John 5:39-40.

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” Rev 3:20-21.

There are different kinds of prayer, such as formal prayers, often prayed in the morning and evening. Then there are informal inaudible prayers that are more like inner conversational thoughts directed to the Lord throughout the day. It is the informal inaudible conversational kind of prayer that brings Jesus into our daily activities, and builds up a personal relationship with Him. It is this type of prayer that Paul is meaning when he said, **“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”** 1 Thess 5:16-18.

ABIDING IN CHRIST

Now that we are participants of His life, Christ wants us to maintain our union with Him. He used the analogy of the vine with its branches to show that if we (as branches), lose our union and dependence on Him, we are incapable of bearing fruit, or imparting life to others.

“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.” John 15:4.

Jesus referred to this relationship as abiding in Him, and He in us. To abide is to dwell in that state permanently, every moment of every day. In this relationship, the branch is sustained by the vine every moment, and the vine needs the branches to accomplish its purpose of bearing fruit. To be fruitful servants we should be ever dependent, and ever available to be used by the Lord.

SETTING OUR HEARTS

Our hearts are the organ of our wills. How we set our hearts determines the state and outcome of our lives. How we set our minds and hearts in our morning prayers has a profound bearing on how we live out our day. This is where we encounter strong opposition from Satan and his demon spirits, who endeavour to direct our thoughts and emotions towards things that are harmful, like how we might bring about the desires of our flesh, or harmful emotions like negativity, directing attitudes towards prospects of ill-fortune, ill-health, downcastness, heaviness, and depression - to all of the obstacles that confront us, rather than all the blessings God has set before us. As we entertain these thoughts our day becomes gloomier and joyless.

On the other hand, Paul tells us to meditate on positive things that uplift our hearts. **“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy — meditate on these things.”** Phil 4:8.

The apostle John tells us that **“... the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil.”** 1 John 3:8-9, and **“He who has the Son has life...”** 1 John 5:12-13. The life we have from Jesus Christ overcomes the works of the devil. The peace of the lord is our stronghold, and **“the joy of the Lord is your strength.”** [Ne 8:10] We have a clear choice – to accept and be ground down by the negative thoughts and accusations of Satan, or to set our hearts to walk in the blessings Jesus has procured for us by His life in us. We can set our hearts to live our day in union with Jesus, drawing on His faith, love, joy, wellbeing etc., or fall prey to Satan’s lies and accusations.

How should we react to Satan’s attacks? To those who have surrendered their spiritual walk into God’s hands, He often allows such attacks to strengthen our faith, and draw us into Himself. Jesus said, **“The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it.”** Luke 16:16. Suffering and attacks by Satan are the catalyst needed to break the stronghold of our flesh and press us into the kingdom of God. Other attacks may be allowed by God to redirect our pathway, or turn us back to Him in repentance.

WE HAVE TO LOSE OUR CARNAL SELF-LIFE TO FIND OUR TRUE LIFE

Jesus said, **“For whoever desires to save his [self] life will lose it, but whoever loses his [self] life for My sake will find it [true life as it is meant to be].”** Matt 16:25-26.

Living as a Christian, the difference between our carnal self-life and that of living in union with Jesus, is like chalk and cheese. As a rule, a newly converted Christian starts his Christian life trying to be a good person by overcoming his former undesirable habits and traits with little success, and

may conclude that this new life is no different to his former one. The reason is that he has a very limited experience of the Holy Spirit because carnal self opposes the Spirit, and blocks His entry and working. **“For the flesh lusts [or wars] against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.”** Gal 5:17-17.

Jesus came to impart His life to us and manifest it to us, and through us to others. But before Christ can reign in us and manifest His life to us, our carnal self-life, with its self-will, self-satisfaction, self-dependence, and self-orientation, must be rejected and laid on the altar of the cross to be put to death by the Spirit. **“For if you live according to the flesh you will die [spiritually]; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live [be fulfilled spiritually].”** Rom 8:13.

By walking according to the flesh our ministry is lifeless because it is deprived of the Spirit. If carnal flesh is put off, the Spirit is enabled to manifest Himself to impart the life of Jesus to us, and our ministry is fruitful. The degree to which carnal flesh is rejected and replaced by the Spirit, is the degree that Christ can reign in us and bear fruit through us. On the other hand it should be understood that a permanent deliverance from the power of the flesh is a lifelong process.

OUR ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF BEING UNITED WITH THE LORD

We should examine our motives for desiring to live our lives in union with the Lord and experiencing the power of His indwelling life in all that we do. If it is a desire for spiritual power or recognition and glory, the Lord will withdraw, for all glory should be His alone, whilst we are **“hidden with Christ in God.”** (Col 3:3)

Our right motive is to be what Christ desires for our spiritual union. In our pilgrimage there is an inherent drawing power in our spirits to be united with its source – the Spirit of God from which it came forth. Similarly, there is a spiritual power from God, drawing us into Himself. God’s ultimate desire and purpose for us is that we are brought into unity with the Lord, one in our hearts, our spirits, and minds, to the end that we become His possession, through whom He can minister His life to members of His body as He wills. Jesus prayed this prayer to the Father for our oneness with Himself and the Father just before He departed from this earth.

“...that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one...” John 17:20-23.

THE LOVE OF GOD IS THE KEY TO UNION WITH CHRIST IN GOD

It is the love of God for us as our Father that holds us steadfast on our pilgrimage, particularly in times of straightness. In times of trial God never deserts us or fails, continually turning our hearts to Him and His love and faithfulness.

“And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.” 1 John 4:16.

It is only through love for Christ that we can have a genuine desire to be totally His possession, and to lay self-will and self-life on the altar of the cross, allowing His complete reign in us and bear

fruit to His glory. It is only through love that we have faith in His faithfulness, to let all things go into His hands.

“If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.” 2 Tim 2:13