

The background is a monochromatic teal color with a soft-focus photograph of a plant stem and several leaves. The stem is dark and runs vertically through the center. The leaves are lighter and have a slightly serrated edge. The overall mood is fresh and natural.

# FRESH START

DAVID COOPER

# **Fresh Start**

**Dr. David C. Cooper**

## *Fresh Start*

When Hannibal crossed the Rubican, he watched until the last of his troops crossed the river and then he ordered the bridges to be burned. Hence we have the phrase today, "Burning bridges behind you." It was his way of assuring that his troops would have no opportunity for retreat. It was a decisive moment of total commitment to a cause that had to succeed—and succeed it did.

The greatest decision a person ever makes is to trust Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord. "For if a man (or woman) is in Christ, he becomes a new person altogether—the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new" (2 Cor 5:17, Phillips).

The decision is followed by a process: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (Col 2:6-7). Remember—"the conversion of a sinner is the miracle of a moment but the manufacturing of a saint takes a lifetime."

What does it mean to follow Christ as Lord and to live the Christian life? We tend to get religion and nationality confused. We speak of Christian, Muslim or Buddhist nations. A few years ago, my wife Barbie and I led a tour group to Turkey. While in Istanbul, we made the mistake of getting into a taxi with a driver who spoke very little English. And we spoke absolutely no Turkish. We wanted him to take us to a restaurant about ten minutes away to meet a group of friends for lunch.

Talk about a communication breakdown. We ended up taking an unplanned scenic tour of Istanbul, which lasted over an hour and cost me fifty dollars! But I learned an important lesson (in addition to the lesson of never getting into a Turkish cab again!) – people think of religion in terms of nationality.

We struck up the best conversation we could with our limited knowledge of each other's language. (When you spend nearly an hour together in a cab it's amazing how much you can learn of another language.)

After talking about our families, how many children we had and so forth, he asked me what I did for a living. This took awhile to explain. First Barbie said, "He's a doctor." I knew that he wouldn't understand that since my doctorate is in theology not medicine. So she tried, "Minister." That didn't register either. She then tried, "Preacher." No response. Finally, I made the sign of the cross with my fingers and said, "Christian." He smiled and nodded his head indicating that he was familiar with the word *Christian*.

So, I asked him, "Are you a Christian?"

He replied, "No. Muslim." Then he added, "Europeans, Americans – Christians." He thought of religion in terms of nationality.

Research indicates that the vast majority of Americans identify their religious affiliation as Christian. So, what is a Christian?

Some people view Christianity as merely a *religion* consisting of beliefs, worship and a code of conduct. Others define it in terms of *rituals* with services, sacraments, sacred days and symbols. Some view it as a system of *regulations* consisting of laws, rules and moral standards; a long list of do's and don'ts. Still others see the Christian life as *reorientation* characterized by self-improvement, positive thinking and getting in touch with one's spirituality.

### **RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP?**

The word *Christian* actually comes from two words: *Christ* and *man*. Christ living in a man; a man living in Christ. A Christian, then, is an individual who has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ – a relationship that influences every aspect of life. A Roman official, in second century A.D., wrote an intriguing letter describing Christians:

*Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language, or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect...They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them.*

*They follow local customs in clothing, food, and the other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the unusual form of their own citizenship. They live in their own native lands, but as aliens... Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country. They marry and have children just like everyone else, but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed laws and go beyond the law in their own lives.*

*They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are put to death and gain life. They are poor yet make many rich. They are dishonored and yet gain glory through dishonor. Their names are blackened and yet they are cleared. They are mocked and bless in return. They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life.*

Sometimes, Christians don't act very Christian. A minister's five-year-old son asked him, "Dad, what is a Christian?"

His father explained that Christians believe in Christ, read the Bible, pray, love others, do what is right, control their tempers, never speak a harsh word, and are always kind.

Puzzled by the answer he asked, "Dad, have I ever seen a Christian?"

When we examine ourselves, and the way we act on occasion, we too are prone to ask, have I ever seen a Christian?

The Christian life isn't perfection; it's progression. I once read, "The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, but the manufacturing of a saint takes a lifetime."

People do not become Christians in mass as when Emperor Constantine baptized the entire Roman army as Christians. Later, Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity to be the state religion of Rome. The Gospel of John

records 27 personal conversations between Jesus and an individual. Salvation is personal.

Christianity is not a matter of family history, cultural identity or nationality. A person becomes a Christian when he or she believes in Jesus as Lord and Savior. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved – you and your household" (Acts 16:31).

Jesus said, "Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). To be "born again" or, actually, "born from above," is to experience a spiritual transformation. The moment we confess our sins to God and believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, we are born again.

If I could summarize the work of God in our lives in one word it would be the word *transformation*. To transform is to change the character, nature, condition or form of something. We are changed from death to life, from sin to righteousness and from eternal condemnation to eternal life. Colossians 1:13 says, "For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves."

To be a Christian is not a self-effort program whereby we attempt to turn over a new leaf and seek to live morally pure. I've listened to people say, "I am going to start trying to be a Christian." That's impossible! A person becomes a Christian by trusting Jesus. It is in trusting, not trying, that we are saved. John writes, "Yet to all who received Him (Jesus), to those who believed on His name, He gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12, 13).

The Apostle Paul describes it this way: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:9, 10, 13).

### **LEARNING THE LANGUAGE**

Every field of study -- mathematics, science, psychology, sociology, theology -- has its own language. The mastery of any field of study first requires a student to learn the language of an academic discipline. When we read the Bible, we encounter the language of faith. Powerful, life-changing words appear throughout its pages that explain what it means to be a Christian.

***We are saved.*** The word salvation means deliverance, wholeness and soundness. In Christ, we are delivered and set free from the guilt and control of sin. We are made whole and complete. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive."

The good news of Jesus is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (see Romans 1:16). "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). We are saved by grace through faith. Grace means that salvation is a free gift. Faith means that we receive the gift of salvation by trusting Christ and Christ alone.

Max Lucado says, "If there are a thousand steps between us and God, he will take all but one. He will leave the final one for us. the choice is ours." That step is the step of faith.

***We are justified.*** Justification is basically a judicial term which means to pardon from guilt and to declare a person righteous. As incredible as it seems, Jesus bore our sins on the cross and paid the penalty for our sins. God pardons us of our sins when we trust Him and credits to our account the righteousness of Christ.

When God sees us, He doesn't see our sins, He sees us dressed in the garments of the righteousness of Christ. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). That's the Great Exchange -- our sin for his righteousness.

***We are sanctified.*** Those who are sanctified are made holy, and set apart for the glory of God. Holiness carries the idea of being special, unique and different. The word saint comes from the word sanctify. If you are like me you're not comfortable calling yourself a saint. Believe it or not, as a Christian you are, as far as God is concerned, a saint. Paul addressed the Corinthians as

“saints in Christ Jesus,” even though they had a host of spiritual problems. Sainthood is a gift of grace, not the result of good deeds.

You have been set apart for his sacred use. Jesus suffered on the cross “to make his people holy by his own blood” (Hebrews 13:12). To be holy is to be different in the sense of being special and unique. The temple of God was called holy because it was different from other buildings. The priests were called holy because they were different from other men. The Sabbath is called holy because it is different from other days. The tithe is called holy because it is different from other money. The Bible is called holy because it is different from other books. The church is called holy because it is different from other organizations.

Here’s a humorous look at holiness. Two brothers were in the Mafia. One dies so his brother goes to a priest requesting a Christian burial. The priest knew of the reputation of the two brothers. The man promised the church a substantial financial gift if the priest would only use the word *saint* in the eulogy for his brother.

The priest agreed to preach the funeral. He struggled to think of a way to incorporate the word saint in his remarks. During the eulogy the priest said to the congregation, “As you all know, the man before us today was the worst, low down, no good, scoundrel, who trafficked in a life of crime. But compared to his brother, he was a saint!”

***We are reconciled to God.*** Sin puts us at enmity with God. Sin is a barrier, which separates us from His presence. When we receive God’s forgiveness the barrier is removed and we are at peace with Him. The relationship severed by sin is mended by grace.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Romans 5:1 and 2: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access into this grace in which we now stand.” We can now approach God with freedom and confidence because we are at peace with Him.

*We are redeemed.* Redemption is an old word, which means to purchase something back that has been lost. It also means to set free that which has been held captive. In ancient times the word was used to describe purchasing back property that had been lost. It also was used in reference to buying a slave.

These are the two sides of the coin of redemption -- ransom and deliverance. Jesus said, "The son of man came...to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Christ has purchased us by his blood out of the slavery of sin and has given us a certificate of freedom. We serve Him out of love not fear; out of choice not coercion. Listen to the song of the redeemed: "You are worthy...because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

#### FROM REVELATION TO REVOLUTION

Christianity begins as a revelation of Christ, but leads to a revolution -- first, of the self, then, of society. The world is changed one heart at a time. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). When Christ enters the human heart a revolution occurs. "Follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you." Let those words sink deep in your heart -- *I will make you*. He promises to mold our lives into his own likeness as we follow Him. Following Jesus means to maintain a close relationship of trust and obedience.

Christians are Christ-made, not self-made. The whole sphere of a person's life is revolutionized by the influence of Christ. Young people wear jewelry with the initials, *WWJD?* The question, *What would Jesus do?*, is a revolutionary question that impacts every aspect of one's life.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local newspaper: "Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before, and he died a very rich man."

Actually, it was Alfred's brother who had died; a reporter botched the epitaph. The account had a profound effect on Alfred Nobel. He decided that he wanted to be known for something other than inventing the means for killing people in war and for amassing great wealth in the process.

So, he initiated the Nobel Prize, the award for scientists and writers who foster peace. He said, "Every man ought to have the chance to correct his epitaph in midstream and write a new one." Jesus gives us the opportunity to change the direction of our lives as we learn to follow Him.

Christianity is a revolution of life. The American Red Cross was gathering supplies, medicine, clothing and food for the suffering people of Biafra. Inside one of the boxes that showed up at the collecting depot one day was a letter which read: "We have recently been converted to Christ and because of our conversion we want to try to help. We won't ever need these again. Can you use them for something worthwhile?"

Inside the boxes were Ku Klux Klan sheets. The sheets were cut into strips and eventually used to bandage the wounds of the suffering in Africa. That's a revolution of the human heart. Hatred was turned to love.

A letter written by Cyprian, third century Bishop of Carthage, to his friend, Donatus, captures the revolution of Christianity:

*It's a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it, a quiet and good people who have learned the secret of life. They have found a joy and wisdom which is a thousand times better than any pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are Christians—and I am one of them.*

### **FAITH AND REPENTANCE**

A person becomes a Christian, a follower of Christ, through faith and repentance. That's what God requires. When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, the people asked, "What shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

The watchwords of Christianity are -- *by faith!* "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Here are the ABCs of faith:

Faith *acknowledges* Jesus as Lord. Faith begins when you intellectually believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be -- the Son of God, the Messiah and Lord of all. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Faith is not blind; it sees clearly. Christianity is not only a matter of the heart; it's also a matter of the mind. We have to think right to live right. Those who say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something, and you're sincere in your beliefs," couldn't be more wrong.

Faith is based on the historical and factual evidence of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. A person has to come to terms with the claims of Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah and Lord of all. Faith, then, begins with an understanding that Jesus is the Son of God.

C.S. Lewis, the noted Oxford scholar, became a Christian through his intellectual investigation of the claims of Jesus. After his research, he concluded that Jesus either had to be a liar of epidemic proportions, a lunatic running around claiming to be the Messiah, or Lord of all. Lewis put his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and became one of the most influential Christians, writing such classics as *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*.

Faith *believes* in Him as Savior. Emotionally, we trust Him to save us from our sins and to give us the gift of eternal life. "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified (that means, declared righteous before God, pardoned of all sins), and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Everyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'" (Romans 10:10, 11, parenthesis added).

Trust is as emotional as it is intellectual. We experience peace when we trust Christ to keep us through every situation of life.

Faith *commits* everything to Christ in full devotion. First the mind, then the emotions and finally, the human will. The fruit of faith is obedience to the

will of Christ. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15).

Faith begins with a revelation of Christ but results in a revolution as we seek to imitate Christ in every area of life. "This is how we know that we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6).

The Apostle's Creed, written around A.D. 700, was provided to give believers in every generation the basics of faith. Take time to read it aloud.

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered unto Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into Hades; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

Coupled with faith is repentance. Repentance is not a negative word. In fact, it's the first word of the gospel. Jesus preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). The first of the ninety-five theses Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Church of Wittenberg, read, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'repent,' he willed that the entire life of believers be one of repentance."

In 1842 the first bathtub was denounced as a "luxurious and democratic vanity." Boston made it unlawful to bathe, except on a physician's order. In 1843 Philadelphia made bathing illegal between November 1 and March 15. Sounds ludicrous, doesn't it? No more ludicrous as those who deny the reality of sin and the need of a spiritual bath in the waters of divine grace.

Our deepest spiritual need is to be cleansed from sin, guilt and failure. Cleansing belongs to those who honestly confess their sins. In his book *Born Again*, Chuck Colson talks about his experiences during Watergate. He

describes one of President Nixon's problems as being unable or unwilling to ever admit he was wrong about anything. Even when Nixon had a cold, with all the obvious symptoms, he wouldn't admit it.

Americans were deeply troubled when former President Bill Clinton lied to his own staff and to the American people about his affair with Monica Lewinsky on national television. Again, it was a case of a person's inability to say, *I was wrong. I'm sorry.*

When you hear the word *repentance* what comes to your mind? Do you picture Jonah, fresh out of the belly of a whale, walking into Nineveh covered with seaweed, smelling like a fish, declaring to the Ninevites, *Repent!* Or, maybe John the Baptist in the Judean wilderness, dressed in camel's hair, with eyes of fire confronting everyone from religious aristocrats to the common man with the message, *Repent!* Or, maybe a fanatic on the street corner of a metropolitan city carrying a sign reading, *Repent!*

Repentance means a change of mind and direction of life. The word *repent* comes from two Greek words meaning, "to perceive afterwards" (*meta*, meaning "after," implying change; and *noeo*, meaning "to perceive," from *nous*, the mind or seat of moral reflection). The good news of Jesus causes one to change his mind and direction in life. The word *repentance* is always used in Scripture of changing one's mind for the better. When we *repent* we turn away from sin and turn toward God. Stop, turn around and go in the opposite direction. That's *repentance*.

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son provides a clear picture of *repentance* (see Luke 15:11-24). A rebellious son took his inheritance and left home. He turned his back on his father and traveled to a far, distant country. He eventually went bankrupt after spending all his money on licentious living. He got a humble job feeding pigs and eating the corns husks the pigs left behind.

When he hit rock bottom, he came to his senses. He had a change of mind. Then, he said to himself, "I will go to my Father." That's a change of purpose. Finally, he made the journey home, which describes a change of direction. Instead of moving away from his father, he went back to him. His

change of direction eventually took him back home. So it is with us. Repentance means we stop running from God, turn around and run toward Him. And He always welcomes us with open arms.

### **LOST AND FOUND**

I think that if we were to ask Jesus, What is a Christian? He would answer, "A Christian is a person who was once lost but is now found." Jesus came into the world to "seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

One prominent Jewish rabbi admits that this is the one new thing Jesus taught about God -- that God searched for humanity. Actually, it is taught in Genesis. The Bible begins with a portrait of the God who searches for those who are lost. When Adam and Eve sinned in Eden, God came looking for them. "Adam, where are you?" He asked (Genesis 3:9). God always seeks us out when we are lost. The Christian's testimony is not, "I found the Lord," but rather, "The Lord found me!" After all, God has never been lost.

One summer Barbie, the children and I were on vacation in Florida. Barbie left the beach to go back to the room. Our son, David Paul was swimming in the ocean. My daughter Charlsi (who was four at the time) and I were building a sand castle. I was busy at work on our masterpiece when suddenly I realized she was gone. Panic gripped me. I ran to the room and got Barbie. She and I, along with David Paul, ran madly down the beach in opposite directions looking for her. We screamed out her name, in tones mixed with fear and hope, searching desperately.

About ten minutes later (which seemed like eternity) a police car drove up on the beach. The police officer got out of the car holding our little girl. What a moment of reunion. We held her tightly and said a prayer of thanks to God.

She had gone down to the water's edge to get some shells for our castle. She got confused and started wandering down the beach looking for me. A lady saw that she looked lost and called the beach patrol.

There is no experience more frightening than being lost. The difference between my daughter and many people is that she knew she was lost. Once you know you're lost, you are ready for Christ to find you.

## PERFECTION OR PROGRESSION?

Have you seen this bumper sticker? *Be patient with me -- God's not through with me yet!* When commenting on spiritual growth, C. S. Lewis remarked, "You can't stay a good egg forever." Growth is fundamental to life. We either grow or we die. We either develop or we deteriorate. We either progress or we regress.

Jesus use of the words "born again," implies that a growth process follows conversion. Just as a newborn baby develops, so does a new Christian. The Apostle Peter wrote, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

The Christian life is a lifelong journey in which God gradually conforms us to the image of Christ. John Bunyan, in his classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, captures the real meaning of the Christian life as a journey of faith. Think of spiritual growth as a direction not a destination.

The point is not to arrive at a state of perfection but to enjoy the journey. "And we, who with unveiled faces, all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with *ever-increasing glory*, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). I want to underscore the words, *ever-increasing glory*.

You will not always see your progress, but God is at work in you. Growth takes time. Changes in character, temperament and behavior take place gradually. God even uses our failures. Sometimes the Christian life is *three steps forward and two steps back!* But at least you are one step ahead of where you were!

Every honest Christian can say, *I'm not the person I want to be, but praise God, I'm not the person I use to be!*

The story is told of a court painter who painted the portrait of Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell was afflicted with warts on his face. Thinking he would please Cromwell, the painter omitted the warts. When Cromwell saw the painting, he said, "Take it away! And paint me warts and all!"

The longer we live the Christian life, the more grateful we become for the grace of God. We move from self-sufficiency to Christ-sufficiency. Such is the nature of true humility. This maturity in humility is clearly seen in the writings of the apostle Paul. In his first letter, he introduces himself as “Paul an apostle” (Galatians 1:1). Later, at the height of his ministry, he writes, “I am the least of the apostles” (1 Corinthians 15:9). Toward the end of his ministry he writes, “I am the very least of the saints” (Ephesians 3:8). (A saint was an ordinary member of the church.) In one his last letters, written shortly before his execution by Nero, he admits, “I am the chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

He wasn't suffering from low self-esteem. He was coming to terms with the amazing grace of God. His testimony was simple: “I am what I am by the grace of God” (1 Corinthians 15:10). As the years passed, he became more deeply aware of his own inadequacy, yet more assured of the all-sufficiency of Christ. On one hand, he says, “I am nothing.” Yet, he claims, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength” (Philippians 1:21).

It has been said that the gate of heaven is so low that no one can enter it except upon his knees.

While the word Christian appears only three times in the New Testament, the word disciple is used nearly 300 times. A disciple is a learner, a follower and an imitator of Jesus. Basically, a disciple is a student. Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me” (Matthew 11:29).

The primary work of the Holy Spirit, through every event and experience of life, is to make us more like Jesus. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son*” (Romans 8:28, 29, emphasis added).

How do we grow spiritually? “So, then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6, 7).

Spiritual growth is summed up in three action words: *Rooted, strengthened, overflowing.*

First, we need to develop deep spiritual roots. The word *rooted* is past tense describing a definite act in the past, namely, our salvation. We are once and for all rooted in Christ when we believe in him. The phrase *built up* is present tense describing the continual action of developing a spiritual foundation.

We are built up “in Him.” Christ is the soil in which we are planted. We aren't called to follow an idea, a system or a religion. We are called to follow Him, to know Him, and to pledge our loyalty to Him.

Roots provide nourishment and stability. Just think about the Chinese bamboo tree. When planted, the seed remains in the soil for five years with no signs of growth. Then, in the fifth year it grows eighty feet, all because of its root system.

The Japanese art of bonsai, or miniaturizing living trees, is done, first of all, by cutting off the taproot. The tree then obtains nourishment only through smaller surface roots and its growth is greatly reduced. The same process can occur with us. Without deep roots nourished by the word of God and the fellowship of other believers, we live only through surface roots, which in turn results in stunted spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth happens through relationships with other believers. John Donne's statement, “No man is an island entire to himself,” is certainly true of the Christian life. Every Christian needs three relationships: A mentor like Paul, an encourager like Barnabas and a disciple like Timothy.

Second, Paul says to be “strengthened in the faith.” A strong faith is needed to handle life's pressures, adversities and temptations. Faith is strengthened by reading and hearing the word of God. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

Faith also grows stronger when it is put to use. Strong faith is an active faith. When you experience the promises of God, your faith will become unshakable.

A couple in my congregation met me after a worship service. "We want to share our miracle with you," they said with big smiles on their faces. Then they showed me their beautiful, newborn baby girl.

They handed me a note with Psalm 113:9 written on it: "He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the Lord."

They told me that God had given them that verse during our New Year's Eve service. The woman had been unable to conceive a child. But they claimed the promise by faith. Ten months later they gave birth to their first child, a little girl. Faith had become a reality in their lives.

### **POUR OUT AS GOD POURS IN**

The third action word Paul uses to describe spiritual growth is *overflowing*. Israel has two main bodies of water -- the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. Three streams of water flow from the mountains in the north to form the fountainhead of the Jordan River. The Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee and exits the sea on the south where it flows through the land of Israel until finally pouring out into the Dead Sea.

For centuries, rabbis have used the example of these two bodies of water to illustrate two types of people. Some people are like the Sea of Galilee. Its fresh waters are filled with fish and its banks are surrounded by lush, fertile land. The Sea has three inlets and an outlet allowing water to pass through. The continual inflow and outflow of its waters keep it fresh.

Others, however, are like the Dead Sea. It has an inlet from the Jordan River but no outlet. Consequently, it has a 33 percent salt and mineral content making its waters thick and oily. Every year more and more of the Dead Sea disappears through evaporation. The land around the Dead Sea is a desert. Its salty waters prohibit life and growth.

What kind of Christian are you? Are you a Sea of Galilee Christian who receives the abundance of God's blessings and then joyfully shares what God has given you with others? Or, are you a Dead Sea Christian, always receiving but never giving?

Joy comes when we experience the cycle of grace. "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Paul says we are to overflow with thankfulness. The word overflow means to spill over the way a river swells during a flood and overflows its banks. It means superabundance. Pour out to others as God pours into you, and your life will always overflow with joy. Keep the cycle of grace moving in your life.

While we are not saved *by* good works we are saved *for* good works. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

We need to keep the emphasis on *good* works, not just works. There is the problem of slipping back into the dead works of the old life we lived before we knew Christ. We also run the danger of prideful works like the Pharisees who practiced their religion only to be praised by men.

The word *good* describes that which is good in its character, morally honorable and pleasing to God, as well as, that which benefits others. Paul reminds us that we are "God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). The word *workmanship* can also be translated as *masterpiece*. Just as people go to famous art galleries to view great works of art, God wants His grace to be displayed in our lives so that people see Christ in us.

The principle of overflowing was brought home to me in an unforgettable way in 1994 when I attended the National Day of Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. Mother Theresa was the keynote speaker. She spoke with such deep conviction on behalf of those suffering around the world.

Her words poured onto our hearts like hot lava from the throne of God. She had truly learned what it means to share in the sufferings of Christ. She was a Christian who was moved with compassion. She shared an account of a man who came to her headquarters one night pleading for food on behalf of a starving family:

*I had the most extraordinary experience of love of neighbor with a Hindu family. A gentleman came to our house and said: "Mother Theresa,*

*there is a family who has not eaten for so long. Do something." So I took some rice and went there immediately. And I saw the children—their eyes shining with hunger. I don't know if you have ever seen hunger. But I have seen it often. And the mother of the family took the rice I gave her and went out. When she came back, I asked her: "Where did you go?" "What did you do?" And she gave me a very simple answer: "They are hungry also." What struck me was that she knew—and who are they? A Muslim family—and she knew. I didn't bring any more rice that evening because I wanted them, Hindus and Muslims, to enjoy the joy of sharing.*

The apostle James tells us, "faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26). He goes on to challenge the validity of faith if there are no works of love. "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:14-17).

The word *religion* is used only once in the New Testament and it is in reference to good works. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

All God's children are gifted children. We all have three gifts to give back as we keep the cycle of grace moving in our lives -- time, talent and treasure. So, devote your time to serving Christ. Use your talents and gifts for His glory by serving others. And give financially as an act of worship to God and to support the gospel. God gives us time, talents and treasure and expects us to make an investment in the kingdom.

Erma Bombeck said, "When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left but could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'"

That Sunday was stormy and many people remained home instead of coming to church. One teacher decided, however, to hold a service in a little Wesleyan Chapel in Colchester, England. One young man accepted Christ at the meeting. His name was Charles Spurgeon. He became the most influential preacher in London, England during the late 1800s. His sermons still inspire untold numbers of believers today.

Serve your way to joy. Don't be like the Dead Sea, always receiving and never giving. You will only become ingrown, stagnant and unproductive. Be like the Sea of Galilee, receiving the mighty inflow of God's blessings and then pour those blessings out to others. Your life will be joyful, enriched and productive.

Saint Francis of Assisi said, "Preach always -- and if necessary use words."

#### **THE ACID TEST**

Love is the measure of the Christian life. "We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in him...There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:16-19).

The perfect love of God drives out the fears of failure, rejection, judgment, insecurity and even death. The love of God is a healing ointment for the wounds of the soul and the fears of the mind.

Love sums up the Christian life. We trust Christ to save us because we have come to know and experience His love. Only when we know the love of God are we free to love others. The royal law, "Love your neighbor as yourself," answers the question, How should a Christian live? Paul tells us, "The entire law is summed up in a single command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14). The only command Jesus gave us is the command to love. "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

Supposedly, Gandhi was asked by a friend, "If you are so intrigued with Jesus Christ, why don't you become a Christian?"

Gandhi replied, "When I meet a Christian who is a follower of Christ, I might consider it."

It is said that Mao Tse Tung came to America seeking a western education and exposure to Christianity. When he faced discrimination, he left disillusioned and turned to Marxism. The rest is history.

Loveless Christianity is powerless to change the world. "By this," said Jesus, "all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Jesus will not allow us the luxury of compartmentalizing our lives into spiritual and natural spheres. We cannot talk about spiritual life from all the other aspects of life.

A teacher of Jewish law asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." But then quickly added, "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37, 38).

Jesus will not permit us to talk about our relationship to God apart from our relationships with others. The measure of our love for others is the measure of our love for God. "Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:21).

What kind of love is Christian love? First, love is selfless. Christ pleased not himself. Second, love serves. Christ came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for all. Third, love sacrifices. Christ gave himself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God for our sins. To be a Christian is not only to believe in Christ, it is to love with the love of Christ.

### **GOD FINISHES WHAT HE STARTS**

Here's some great news: *God promises to complete the work He started in you!* "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

You will make many mistakes and fail to reach many goals as a Christian. But take heart, "We all stumble in many ways," says the apostle James (James 3:1). When you fall, confess your sins to God, then get back up and keep on

going in your Christian journey. John tells us, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

You may also go through times when you lose your enthusiasm. You may even feel as though you're not really saved. We all are subject to changing emotions. But we live by faith not by feelings. Never measure your relationship to God by your feelings. God is faithful regardless of your feelings. He promises, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

When we fail we feel like hypocrites. Just because you fail doesn't make you a hypocrite. The word *hypocrite* comes from Greek drama and means an actor on a stage. In a drama, actors play the part of characters. Since the actor is "acting," he or she is a hypocrite. The word came to mean one who pretends to be something he's not. Hypocrites intentionally deceive others to take advantage of them.

When a Christian sins, or struggles with a spiritual issue in his life, or fails to be a good witness for Christ, he needs to confess and repent of his sins. But his imperfection does not make him a hypocrite.

You can be confident of God's love. Paul the apostle asks, "What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?"

He then gives a resounding response: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39).

Someone asked me recently, "What do you believe about eternal security?"

I replied, "I only plan on being saved once."

God promises security if we trust in Him. Your eternal salvation is based on God's grace and power to keep you, not the level of your spiritual

performance. Here is one of the most reassuring promises in the Bible: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy" (Jude 24). We are saved by grace and kept by grace. God is able to keep us for all eternity as we trust in Him.

There are two truths you need to know about God's love. First, you cannot do anything good to get God to love you more. Second, you cannot do anything bad to get God to love you less. Now, I'm not advocating irresponsibility. Actions certainly carry consequences. Besides, when we know that God loves us we are motivated to obey Him. My point is, God's love is unconditional. No strings attached. Our love is conditional. We love *if...* We love *because of...* But God loves *in spite of...*

I have often pondered the difference between Christians who are joyful, positive and free versus those who are negative, legalistic and uptight. I am convinced it all boils down to love. As long as we fear God, in an unhealthy sense, and try to earn God's love by religious works, we will lack joy. But when we truly believe that God loves us, we will experience His joy.

I was speaking at a rally for a friend who is an evangelist. During the evening, he recognized several other ministers who were present. One couple in particular shared with us their testimony of God's grace. The man had been in prison for robbery. He was a crack addict and stole to support his habit. He became depressed in prison and decided to commit suicide. One day he made up his mind to hang himself that very night by using the bed sheet.

But, coincidentally or divinely, during that very day a parole officer came to see him. Surprisingly, she was not even assigned to his case.

"The Lord has sent me to give you a message from Him," she said confidently. "He wants you to know that He has a plan and purpose for your life." She went on to share God's plan of salvation with him.

That night, instead of ending his life, he began a new life. He knelt by his bed in the cell and asked Christ to come into his life to save him. After his release, he started going back to the prison to minister to the inmates. Later, he resigned his job to go full-time in prison ministry.

He and his wife now minister regularly in 14 jails and prisons in northeast Georgia. He has led hundreds of inmates to know Jesus Christ all because a parole officer listened to the Holy Spirit and cared enough to give him the greatest gift of all -- the gospel of Jesus Christ.



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