

Once Escaped, Not Caught Again

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Peter says that those who escape the “defilements of the world” only to get mired up in slavery to them again, end up in a worse state than they were in before knowing Christ. One thing certain about the universe is that we move into increasing glory or fall back into deeper darkness. We’re destined to do ever more of what we love. No one can arrest progress forward or backward by hanging onto a branch and watching the rapids beneath. Much attempted abstinence of one kind or another comes from fearful clinging rather than a kept-ness, and clinging always turns into falling away back into the lusts of the flesh.

One thing I’ve observed in almost five years of leading Bible studies at the jail with my mother-in-law, Mimi, is that inmates who love the Lord regularly see jail as a safe place, away from the threatening temptation on the street. Though eagerly hungering for the prospect of release, fear grips them at the thought of getting out. Jail has meant a safe get-away from drugs and bad company, providing a chance to firm up in the Lord and let new revelation sink in. Still, what will happen after release?

This kind of fear is not unique to inmates; I lived in it for decades, thinking that someday deception would finally win, and the devil and the flesh would leave me ended in ruins. Sin habits work like this: someone suffers in the shame and self-hatred of a sin habit, and finally that drives the person to a time of abstinence. Look out—the raw and angry side of every sensibility rises up with such force that endurance through this time looks impossible without a comforting remedy.

Reversion to old sin habits at first seems out of the question, but as the pain of daily life, with its never ending way of pressures and temptations, goes on and on, old habits offer a chance for temporary relief. That choice leads to sudden gratification, followed by a plummet back into the old self-hatred and fear.

On the cycle goes, often for years until one realizes that the dark way always leads to the same dark place. We do ourselves good to ask, “When did that behavior ever, ever work?” Not only that, the consequences get more profound with increasing trips into slavery; the losses pile up worse than ever.

Does this mean that there is no “quick sin, quick cleanse,” as my old missionary mentor Norman Grubb used to say? Yes, “quick sin, quick cleanse” is always God’s remedy. Since our forgiveness is not by any work of our own, and Christ did the complete work

on the Cross 2000 years ago, there remains nothing further for God to do (as Hebrews chapters 9 & 10 tell us).

A better life exists, however, than feared cycles of sin and cleansing. God's plan for us includes forgiveness plus a way to live free from sin. I can hear the screams of protest already from those who shouldn't scream, and I can hear the "amen" already from those who shouldn't amen. The former live in a sin consciousness, always praying, "Father forgive us of our many sins," but these don't name specific sins, don't grieve over them, and do not plan to really give them up. They prefer an "always falling short" outlook that knows assurance of heaven by justification by faith, but which still relies on a failing-self to try to be like Christ. This failing self is a self falsely held onto and not let go of for an indwelling Christ to live His life in us.

The latter, those who should not amen the idea of God's plan that we can live free from sin, do not deal with sin at all but magically eliminate it from their consciousness. They think that they have done what God means, when really they hold onto denial and need to go back to 1 John 1 by recognizing the difference between light and darkness.

For whom will the plan work? Paul tells us at the end of Romans 5 that the law makes sin abound. Without the law, we think we're doing fine, like Paul says in Romans 7 where he felt quite alive

and fine once without the law. The law brings us the consciousness of sin that we need to know in order that we need a savior. Christians in general understand the point that the blood of Christ forgives their acts of sin. What Christians generally do not see is that we are dead to sin, as Paul says in Romans 6.

It does take a revelation to see this. I went to a pretty good university years ago, but while there, when I read Romans 6 about being dead to sin, I knew that this could not be true because I still could sin and still did sin (not to mention that I still wanted to). I knew that the Bible was the word of God, but my experience overruled the plain assertions of what the Bible said. Amazingly, a Christian can fight for the infallibility of the Bible, without believing at all its major precepts about sanctification.

The way that happens is this: a person, such as myself, accepts Christ to come live in his or her heart. Good, so Christ lives in the Christian. Is this no more, in most cases, than a person hidden away inside who comes to the rescue at moments of perceived need? Certainly, most do not envision a total Christ indwelling the self and taking over to live completely apart from human help.

We're not inert creatures, so if Christ does not need our help to live His life in us, what do we do? We receive. We come a long

way when we realize that God created us as temples for His Spirit to live in. He wanted to be human. Since He knows, wills, and desires as the properties of his person-hood, He created us with the same faculties on a created basis so that He could join Himself to us as one. I can't improve on Paul, so here's Paul: "But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Cor. 6:17).

God, therefore, does not want to see us trying to be like Him, when His plan all along has been to indwell us and live His life in a Spirit-to-spirit, Creator-to-creature union that means that we are never He, but He lives as us. We get all the pleasure of God-consciousness without being God. The fundamental sin is that of thinking, "I am God." Horrifying as this thought is to a Christian, I woke up after decades of adult Christian life (really sub-Christian life) and found myself saying one day, "I'm not God." I thought this the strangest utterance to myself, perhaps of my whole life. This utterance brought great relief. I thought in the next minute, "I must have thought on some level all along that I am God." Yes, I realized that I had thought that.

When we try to do what only God can do, we think that we are God. That's why I laugh at the "try to be like Christ" efforts of Christians still believing that they just need God's help to go along with some self-improvement. Christ is an only one-of-a-kind.

The plan to live free from sin has to work another way other than trying to be like Christ. Once we see that God created us to be temples of His Spirit that live in a fixed spirit to Spirit union with Him as one, we can at least start to get off of ourselves as the source for living. Our place is to receive, just as a branch on a tree receives from its trunk and roots. Tree branches live an easy life; just hang there and enjoy. Abiding means, "Don't go anywhere; stay here." That doesn't mean the subliminal assumption I had for years of a branch trying to get attached and then having to reattach constantly in a sweaty, awful process that requires so much energy that it finally makes a person angry at such a plan. But that's not the plan and never has been.

The plan is rest. Dead to sin means not only that God forgives my sins through the blood of Christ (and no other way) but that my human temple now has new ownership. Here is where great confusion exists when one thinks that becoming a Christian Christ means coming into a heart previously independent. I felt shock and horror when I began to hear that another spirit had lived in my temple before conversion. I did not want to think that Satan had ever been my occupant and boss. Romans 6 says, however, that we were slaves of sin. That cannot just mean that as independent selves we stayed mired up in flesh bondage and self-will.

God created man to be His temple, and in Eden, when the first parents turned away from a life of indwelling by God's glory, in came the spirit of error, as Paul calls it in Ephesians 2. The devil doesn't want people, however, to know this. I like to say that God gives us a multiple-choice question with two options for life: a) slaves of sin, or b) slaves of righteousness. We, however, want, or wanted to pencil in another option: c) be my own boss. Since this is the lie Lucifer fell by, he wants to deceive people by this same lie.

John makes the issue plain in his first epistle: "children of God," or "children of the devil." That takes care of the foundation for the delusion of being an independent self. Dead to sin has to mean that we no longer have to sin because now we have a new in-dweller, Jesus Christ, and living from His life as our life, enables us to walk as He walked, as John puts the matter.

God, however, could not just pronounce us dead to sin without a means of accomplishing that, so He accomplished this through the body death of Christ, which Paul details for us in Romans 6 by saying that God put us into Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. Romans 6 gives the foundation for the more succinct Galatians 2:20. Christ became who we were, the first Adam indwelled by the spirit of error, so that we could unite with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection.

Dead to sin, therefore, does not mean that a Christian cannot sin but that a Christian is free not to sin. How wonderful. I have to pause and reflect on that. John says the same thing in 1 John 2 when he writes, "My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin" (2:1 NASB). John goes on to talk repeatedly in his first letter about abiding, which means living from the life of another, His life. Paul, John, James, and Peter all say the same thing differently expressed—that we live by the life of God as our life. Paul calls it "not I but Christ"; John calls it, "abiding"; James calls it "the engrafted word"; and Peter calls it "partakers of the divine nature." They all mean the same thing.

Dead to sin will not work, however, if we also do not know "dead to law," as Rom 7 tells us. Sin gets its power from the law, so where a person still lives by trying to be like God or trying to be like Christ, the result can only be a lowering of the standard of God's law or a constant frustration at inability to keep the law. God means us to experience the latter—not to throw out His law as do the wolves in sheep's clothing theologians who make God's laws relative to their own desires. Dead to law, once again, means that we see that we die to law by being in the body of Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. So now when God's law comes to us, we say, "God You are keeping Your own law in me."

Law really means how a thing operates, so law is really the description of God's nature, which is never our nature, but which nature indwells the Christian. Once we recognize God and His law as one and the same, we cease trying to obey separate precepts as if they are things that we do that imitate what God does. This thinking unravels Galatians 2:20 and puts a person back under the lie of being a separate self.

The trying struggle can go on for years. I remember Sylvia Pearce saying to me a long time back, "Brian, your problem is trying." I asked, "How can I stop trying?" She answered, "Try until you can't try anymore." I knew, and she probably knew, that I still liked trying and had no real desire to quit yet.

The time came, however, when I did want to stop trying. Life got so bad and hellish that to go on I had to stop trying and was glad to. The great release opened up, and I stepped into it. I stopped trying. Always before that looked too fearful, for I thought, "If I don't try, I'll surely fall into sin." It seemed incongruous to think, 'Cessation from trying is the only preventative to sin.' The answer is always the opposite of what we first thought.

I can always tell when I'm starting to try again, and the signals tell me also of the great danger that ensues by continuing in that. As righteous and holy as trying might look, the peril is deadly, for it means reverting to a supposed self that can do what that self

thinks that it should do or what God says to do. This is folly. As dangerous as not trying looks, if we know that we live a kept life, we know that we have chosen God's safe way.

Recovery groups use the Twelve Steps, and the First Step is powerlessness. The founders of the recovery movement knew that they borrowed a simple Bible truth, that we are powerless to change ourselves in any way, powerless over the sin habits that have enslaved us. This is why I live by a simple confession: God, I'll sin that sin, any sin, if You don't keep me, and thank You that You are keeping me."

Temptation knocks on the door regularly. The only way through is by His keeping. Otherwise we fall. Believing that He is keeping us is all that works. Can a person say that and be deceived, still a slave of the devil and the lusts of the flesh? Certainly, for every true practitioner recognizes that false practitioners say some of the same things but in a deluded way. That's why John wrote in his first letter, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1:6 NASB).

This does not mean that we have to go on with the dreary, general confession, "Father, forgive us of our many sins." God will keep you if you want Him to. Faith takes the step past just saying, "God can keep me." Faith says, "He is." There's the cross-

over. Faith is the is-ness. The proof is in the victory over those old sin habits. You know when you've got the victory there; there's no mistaking that!