



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 32: The Hidden Life

Since then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. **For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.** When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4)

As we have reflected on the matters of spirituality over this year, we have seen a number of important things. The most important of these is that our growth in Jesus Christ is a concern for which God our Father takes the primary responsibility. He does not simply leave our growing to us, although that growing does involve us and our wills. He is constantly at work firstly transforming us through the grace of the Lord Jesus, and through the ministry of the Spirit in us, renewing us in and conforming us to the image of His Son. He works the gospel through our lives and experience.

We have seen, (often!), that the regular pattern by which He does this is: (1) He brings us to acknowledge our need for the Holy Spirit to teach us and to grow us; (2) in answer to this need, the Spirit takes us to God's Word, showing us all that is ours in Christ ; and (3) to work this through us so it is experience and not simply knowledge, God our Father leads us through trials, difficulties, hardships and temptations. As He leads us through these repeated cycles what He is doing is bringing us to full maturity into the stature of His Son, Jesus Christ.

What we actually feel during this process may well be the opposite. We may feel that what is exposed through this cycle of God's dealing with us is deeper and deeper levels of sinfulness. We find that we are, as children of Adam, so bad that even our good bits are bad! Even what we may have considered virtuous about ourselves we see to be polluted by sin's awful presence. Our strengths turn out to be weaknesses more fearful than our weaknesses!

But in fact this process of uncovering and exposing sin's effects in us is the uncovering of archaeological fossilised remnants of a former power which once had enormous sway in our lives. Already, in Jesus Christ, the power of sin has been not only put on the endangered list, but brought to extinction! The dinosaur is dead! As these remnants of the way things once were are exposed, we find God our Father is leading us to call out more and more to Him and hold more and more tightly to the promises granted and assured by Him to us in Jesus Christ. As we see the effect of what once was, we are led to consider more and more what now is in Christ. The devil of course is trying his best to get us to believe that in fact we are locked into the past. We have to keep our focussed on the cross and empty grave as evidence that this is not so. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a new day has dawned.

Another way of saying this is that our growth into the fullness of the stature of Jesus our elder brother, Saviour and Lord is a hidden growth. It is a growth which is least seen by us who are growing. We feel ourselves to be going downwards, but in fact the Lord is leading us upwards. Spirituality is a crucifying experience.

The New Testament speaks in many places of the hidden nature of our life and growth in Christ. The verses from Colossians at the head of this study are one such place:

You have died and your lives are now hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory.

Our lives are joined to the life of Jesus Christ. All that matters—our wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption—is ours only as it comes to us from him (see 1Cor. 1:30). Currently Jesus Christ has been received into the heavens, and is not visible to us, except through the eyes of faith. It will be true then that our own righteousness and holiness—i.e. our sharing in the righteousness and holiness of Jesus—will not be visible to us except through the eyes of faith. This does not mean it is unreal: it is as real as the glory of Jesus Christ. But it is hidden now, awaiting a final unveiling with the revelation of the Son of God from heaven.

John expresses this truth too in his first letter:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason that the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1John 3:1-3)

Already, now, because of Jesus Christ, we are the children of God—the Father's love has given this high privilege to us. Currently this status is unseen by the surrounding world. This is not surprising!—when God's own Son walked on earth in flesh and bones, he was not recognised either. More, there is a hiddenness of the ultimate destiny of our being God's children. That destiny is linked to the resurrection glory of Jesus Christ. Only when he appears shall we be unveiled. And, more, we will only recognise our glory as we see him. Seeing him, we see all that is ours in him!

In both passages, Paul and John have a concern for the holy living of Christians. Paul expresses this by calling us to “setting your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Immediately after, in 3:5, he calls us to:

Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, *seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.* (Col. 3:5-10)

The basis for holiness, and the resisting of all unholiness, is a hidden but real basis: our lives are hid with Christ in God. We have put on Jesus Christ, and the “earthly things” (i.e. what is the result of sin in us) are simply traces of a former reality, not the current one. God is actually at work in us, renewing us and conforming us to His likeness in Jesus Christ.

In 1John, we hear the exhortation to holy life in terms of hope. We have the hope of being like Jesus, conformed to him, when he appears, and so while we wait in hope, we purify ourselves, just as Jesus Christ is pure. That is, we let his purity invade every aspect of our existence, because he has joined us to himself unbreakably.

This truth, that our lives are deeply connected to Jesus Christ, forms the basis of all corrective teaching about improper behaviour amongst Christians in the New Testament. One example: in 1Corinthians 6 Paul has to deal with a very difficult pastoral situation. Christian men are using the services of prostitutes. Firstly he tells them (1Cor. 6:9-11) that, though such behaviour is incompatible with the life of the kingdom, his working assumption about them is that they are in the kingdom. This means that in union Jesus Christ and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel, they have been washed clean from all defilement, made holy, and set right with the Father. Now their bodies are the locus of holiness, being sanctified for the Lord (6:13). God our Father has raised up Jesus bodily, and so we too will be raised bodily (6:14). Our bodies are members of Christ (6:15). So, on these grounds—not because Christ is distant from us, but because he is so deeply connected to us—we are to flee sexual immorality, and to glorify God in our bodies.

All the while, through the work of God's grace in our lives, we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. There is progress being made. But it is hidden progress, progress which to us seems hidden under its opposite. We do not see ourselves becoming more and more radiant, but rather less and less so! The fact is we have this treasure of Christ in earthen vessels, in jars of clay, so that it may be clear that the surpassing power that is working the transformation belongs not to us but to God. In all that is happening, we are being prepared for an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison, a full share in the full glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. (See 2Cor. 4:7-18).

To finish: In his fine book, *The Hammer of God*, Bo Giertz reflects on all this. He compares our lives as Christians as being like a gardener. (pp. 314-320)¹

¹ Bo Giertz, *The Hammer Of God*, Augsburg:Minneapolis, 1960, 1973