

Be There Next Year

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Forerunner, "Personal," November 2005

Paul writes in Romans 5:12-14:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—(For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. . . .

In one broad stroke, Paul provides a major reason why this world is the way it is. Death reigns, and mankind, in bondage to Satan and this world, is cut off from God. Sin, introduced to the world by Adam and Eve and practiced by all mankind since, is the cause. We must not excuse ourselves by saying we have just been caught up in the effect of others' sins, but we must admit that we have kept sin's flame burning.

Occasionally, I have stated that the relationship with God, established by our justification through Christ's sacrifice, *is* salvation. This is a generalization because a number of specific elements are required for salvation, but it is essentially true since that relationship provides the means for receiving the spiritual strength to fight the battles of faith and to overcome and grow. Through this relationship, we are able to leave Babylon and bring glory to God.

Unbeknownst to us until God's calling and conversion, Babylon occupied our time and attention. It is exceedingly attractive to human nature because it has been created by Satan; it draws like a magnet. In one sense, it is all we knew since birth, and we willingly gave ourselves over to it, allowing it to shape our attitudes and character.

The members of God's church have just returned from another Feast of Tabernacles. Though the Feast is usually a wearying experience, we usually return spiritually energized. As the Feast ends, we have high hopes and resolve to give ourselves zealously to overcoming. To accomplish this, we must pursue a second general principle, which will simultaneously ensure that we are present at next year's Feast.

The Only Matrix for Salvation

What we must do is to take advantage of our access to God, through which we have a relationship with Him, while at the same time diligently seeking Him. Both of the generalities mentioned so far are true statements because the relationship we have with God provides the only matrix for salvation. A *matrix* is an environment in which a thing is developed. An almost perfect synonym for a matrix is "womb." If we have no access to God, there can be no relationship with Him, who is the source of everything needed for salvation. Our relationship with God is the spiritual womb in which we are being created to become like Him and share in His glory.

A simple word picture can illustrate this truth. When God created Adam and Eve, He placed them in the environment He had designed to enhance their further spiritual development, the Garden of Eden.

In the Garden were the Two Trees. In this environment, Adam and Eve were to have a relationship with God, aided by the Tree of Life, of which they were invited to partake freely. Instead, under temptation, they took of the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and were expelled from the Garden. The relationship ended.

An angel with a flaming sword was placed to guard the entrance to the Garden, so that there could be no doubt that the relationship with God had ended. To emphasize this fact, the Bible is clear that Adam and Eve died without being readmitted. Without access to God and the Tree of Life, their spiritual development came to a crashing halt. Adam and Eve represented all of mankind, and God judged that all who followed would endlessly repeat what they had done, even though they would not sin in exactly the same way.

His judgment was, of course, correct. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3: 23). Thus, all have been cut off from God through sin. Knowing that all of Adam and Eve's progeny would sin, God provided a means by which they could reestablish a relationship with Him, even though the environment for the relationship would not be the Garden of Eden.

What, then, is our present position? Since the Garden of Eden no longer exists, but we nonetheless have access to God, we spiritually stand at a crossroads, which forces us to choose the direction of our lives. In fact, it requires two clear-cut choices that we may have to repeat a number of times during our conversion due to the inconsistency of our character.

The first choice is obvious: We must choose whether we will go in the direction of God's way or continue in the ways of the world. Deuteronomy 30:19 proposes this clearly: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live." This is virtually an exact copy of the choice God set before Adam and Eve in the Two Trees.

The second choice is whether we will develop the relationship with God zealously or merely casually. Here are the alternatives:

- » To make little or no effort and likely become swept away and reabsorbed into the world and the ways we know so well and feel comfortable with, or
- » To strive against the natural flow of this world and the current of our carnal inclinations, seeking resolutely and consistently to strengthen the relationship that God opened to us.

The latter is truly seeking God. It is not a matter of looking for God as if to find Him, but endeavoring to be like Him. The apostle Paul illustrates his example in I Corinthians 9:26-27: "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."

Moving Beyond Justification

We are commanded to live by faith, to come out of Babylon, and to choose life. We cannot stay neutral in this issue. We either seek God fervently or possibly die the second death. The means of opening this choice to us is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1-2, 8 proclaims:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. . . . But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Thus, we now have access to the Father and the Tree of Life, and we have a relationship to build upon, which gives us every opportunity to go on to everlasting life. God has willed, though, that our development into His image must take place within this world.

Part of God's solution clears us of guilt for past sins, the act known as *justification*. Justification by faith in Christ's blood is only a partial solution to the salvation issue and to coming out of Babylon because it changes neither the nature nor the character that are the foundational reasons justification through Christ's blood is necessary. It does clear one of indebtedness due to sin, and that in itself is a major blessing, an enormous gift.

By itself, it does not change the behavior that is responsible for us being indebted in the first place. Yet, it does open the door to that change, which is why Romans 5:10 says, "We shall be saved by His life." Help for us to change is available because Christ is our *living* High Priest. Help for us to come out of Babylon and to be at next year's Feast is available because He is alive to assist us.

Notice that verse 2 says, ". . . we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in the *hope* of the glory of God." Having access to God *should* lead to everlasting life. Most assuredly it can, but only if we make the effort to fulfill our part of the New Covenant.

Hebrews 5:14; 6:1 adds clarity to the fact that we must move on from justification:

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.

These verses clearly state that one must go on from a beginning to full maturity and the ability to discern good and evil. The step that follows justification the Bible calls *sanctification*, during which the Christian, by means of his relationship with God, goes on to "perfection." Zealously following through in this process will bring a person to this state. The zeal is an element the Christian must supply.

Seeking God in Babylon

God is not in the business of saving people just for the sake of saving them. He is saving humanity *and* creating His character in them. Our responsibility in this process of becoming one with God is to seek Him with all our heart.

The prophet Amos cries out to the Israelites of his day, "Seek the Lord and live" (Amos 5:6), and in verse 14, he proclaims, "Seek good and not evil, that you may live." In Jeremiah 29:12-13, God prophesies to Israel in a time of desperate trouble: "Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."

Seeking God is accomplished by means of combining basic elements: frequent daily prayer, Bible study, meditating on the practical applications, occasional fasting, and perhaps above all, applying what we learn in humble, submissive obedience. Humbly and faithfully doing these will work to convert us from conforming to this world to conforming to God and His way, but doing them takes sacrifice to accomplish (see Romans 12:1-2). The process of sanctification is greatly supported, indeed driven, by gratitude for the gifts already given, the hope of promises fulfilled, and the desire to please and glorify God.

In the light of these things, the appealing but dangerous allurements of Babylon and Laodiceanism become seen for what they are. They are an ever-present reality attracting and diverting our attention from seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Because of God's calling, our priorities in life have changed.

In a striking word picture, Revelation 17:2 describes the effect of people's relationship with Babylon: ". . . with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication." Those caught up in Babylon become spiritually drunk, a result of imbibing its way of life.

Wine has significant spiritual meaning. Proverbs 20:1 says, "Wine is a mocker," meaning that it initially has a pleasant, lifting, energizing effect, but it is a deception. Its secondary effect is depressive, ensnaring those who allow themselves too much. In other words, it makes one drunk. The mind of a person under its influence becomes dizzy, fuzzy, and unfocused; his perception of reality becomes distorted and uncertain. His body staggers under the effect of the drug; it does not react as the drinker commands it to act. At the same time, he is lured into thinking that he actually has greater powers than he had before becoming influenced. The reality is that he has lost control and become dangerous to himself and others.

"Wine" in this illustration is Babylon's way of life, and "fornication" figuratively portrays faithlessness, such as one would experience within a covenant relationship like a marriage. In Revelation 18:3, God adds "wrath" to the "wine of her fornication," including the penalties that descend on its hapless victims as they practice sins of unfaithfulness to God.

Spiritual Drunkenness

Hosea 4:11-12 declares: "Harlotry, wine, and new wine enslave the heart. My people ask counsel from their wooden idols, and their staff informs them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray, and they have played the harlot against their God." A major key to understanding the application of both Hosea and Amos to us is that both prophets prophesied in Israel, the ten northern tribes, in an era similar to that in which we live, that is, in a last generation before a major national calamity. In their case, it was just before the people of Israel fell to the invading Assyrian armies, were removed from their homeland, and scattered to the four winds, never to return.

Historical records and archeological findings show that Israel was quite prosperous at the time, a major power in the world. Simultaneously, the nation was morally rotten to the core, and social injustice was the order of the day throughout the land. The Israelites of that time were literally getting drunk, as Amos reports them drinking wine by the bowlful (Amos 6:6). Yet a far more spiritual drunkenness guided their conduct. In addition, they practiced the ritual harlotry of the pagan religions they had adopted.

However, the lesson for us is spiritual. God is saying that at the end time, it will be as if a demonic power has seized the nation, destroying loyalty to God in a spiritual drunken frenzy, during which the people will think themselves totally in control.

Even as drugs destroy a person's capacity to think clearly, break down resistance to evil, and so becloud the mind that he becomes morally stupid, so does the spiritual drunkenness that results from a person allowing himself to drink in this world's ways. Escape into the fantasies of this world's attitudes and conduct deprives a person of his understanding, removes inhibitions, inspires false confidence—even bravado, plays havoc with modesty and restraint, and destroys loyalty within relationships.

The prophet writes in Hosea 10:1-2:

Israel empties his vine [*is an empty vine*, KJV]; he brings forth fruit for himself. According to the multitude of his fruit he has increased the altars; according to the bounty of his land they have embellished his sacred pillars. Their heart is divided; now they are held guilty. He will break down their altars; He will ruin their sacred pillars.

Hosea exposes the problem between God and Israel. He describes Israel as a luxuriant grape vine sending runners in every direction, indicating a bountiful crop. It indeed produces great material prosperity, but it is consumed through self-indulgent gorging. This is God's way of showing that Israel abused its prosperity: It used its prosperity for the purposes of idolatry. Its prosperity played a part in corrupting the Israelites' hearts, which is why Hosea mentions the divided or disloyal heart in context with its bountiful fruit.

A large part of this world's appeal is its offer of financial security. However, God shows there is a possible harmful, secondary effect: As people become financially secure, their attention is diverted from His purpose to vain and unimportant things. In other words, prosperity turns people's heads. There is no doubt that prosperity is good, but unless one is properly focused and disciplined, it can also be a demanding master because of its power to distract one into idolatry. Recall God's prophecy in Deuteronomy 32:15, predicting that when Israel prospered, then it would rebel.

Laodiceanism and a Divided Heart

This connects with the curse of Laodiceanism because God shows in them what can happen spiritually as people increase materially. Because such people are drunk through riches' deceptive promise, their judgment is in danger of being radically altered. The Laodicean evaluates himself, saying, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17).

He is deceived into thinking that his material prosperity proves that God approves of his conduct and attitudes. His overall conduct may not be too bad, but his poor self-analysis persuades him that he has no urgent need to seek God any further. He then merely floats, going through the motions, even feeling good about himself as he neglects so great salvation (Hebrews 2:3). His opinion of his holiness as compared with God's judgment is so far off base, it causes Jesus Christ to regurgitate him from His body.

Recall the mention in Hosea 10:1 of increasing and embellishing altars just before Israel fell to Assyria. One would think that, if altars increase during this period of prosperity, then religion is flourishing. Indeed, religion flourished, as Amos, Hosea's contemporary, clearly reports (see Amos 5:

21-27). However, it was not the religion God gave through Moses, but idolatry that flourished! It was a corruption of that religion, for the Israelites syncretized that holy way with Baalism and other idolatries.

In Hosea 10:2, God charges Israel with having a divided heart. Commentaries are at odds over what the Hebrew word translated "divided" means. Most modern translations use "false," "deceitful," or "faithless," and none of these are wrong, including "divided." The Hebrew word suggests "smoothness" or "flattering," describing people who "talk the talk" but do not "walk the walk."

Isaiah 29:13 clarifies what God means: "Therefore the Lord said: 'Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men.'" Their reverence for Him was mere intellectual accommodation intended to appease Him. They used the name of God frequently, saying they trusted Him, but they filled the nation with stealing, lying, and murder.

II Kings 17:33 illustrates their worship: "They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away." This describes to a *T* what Israel did then and their descendants are continuing to do today. Moffatt renders this, "They worshipped the Eternal, and they also served their own gods."

This chapter reports on the behavior of the people placed in Israel after Israel's conquest and deportation by Assyria between 722-720 BC. These people, who became known as the Samaritans, feared the Lord but worshipped their own gods. They were afraid of God, but they did not really change their way of life. Thus, they developed a syncretic religious system, a blending of the truth of God and outright paganism. The Jews of Christ's day clearly recognized this putrid blend and despised the Samaritans for it.

What is so interesting is that, by verse 36, God is no longer reporting on the Samaritans but is addressing Israel. In other words, God is saying that He was driven to defeat and scatter Israel because they were guilty of exactly the same sin as the Samaritans! They too had blended the worship of the true God with outright paganism, utterly corrupting the relationship He had established with them.

It is urgent that we understand what is involved here because it reveals the cause of God's anger that led to Israel's defeat and scattering. We must understand that *our god is not what we say we worship but what we serve. Our god is what we give our lives over to.*

Theoretically, the Israelites did not believe in idols, but in reality, they did. They believed in a Creator God, but they worshipped Him at the shrines they erected to the Baals. While they gave lip service to the Creator, they adopted most of the Canaanitish religion with its lewd immorality, and in actual practice, patterned their life after it. In daily life, they conformed to and reflected the Babylonish system just as Israel does today. This is exactly what God warns us to flee, and the only way to come out of it is by developing and maturing in our relationship with God.

Measuring Growth

Returning to Hosea 10:1 and the idea of prosperity and the increase of altars, we can observe a connection between this concept and the Laodicean's making a poor judgment of his spiritual condition. The Revised Standard Version translates these phrases as, "The more his fruit increased the more altars he built; as his country improved he improved his pillars."

Both altars and pillars are references to religion—specifically, pagan religion. The plural terms reflect a typically carnal conclusion that numerical increase indicates growth and of a sort that is good because God must surely approve. Growth in the number of places of worship would convince most that religion is flourishing.

Religion, though, is different from secular pursuits. The greatest Teacher and Pastor whoever graced this earth preached to tens of thousands of people, yet ended His ministry with only 120 converts. Moreover, He calls the church a "little flock," signifying that it would never grow large (Luke 12:32). Using numbers as the standard, Jesus was an outright failure! Any large Billy Graham evangelistic campaign produces more "conversions" each night than Jesus had during His entire ministry.

Many comparisons are elusive and easily manipulated, not deserving to be depended upon as true evaluations of quality. For instance, Americans tend to rate the greatness of a city by the size of its population. But is New York City really the greatest American city? Does it really deserve to be called "the Big Apple"? In the public mind, the strength of a commercial business is measured by its income. If a business does a million dollars more business this year than last, then it is considered to be flourishing. Evaluating in this manner is one thing that gets the Laodicean in trouble. Religion, however, is not that sort of commodity at all; it is spirit.

We sometimes say, "So and so is a big man." What do we mean by this? The person may not be physically impressive, but we suggest the greatness of his influence. Isaiah 53:2 says of Jesus, "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him." Likewise, according to tradition, the apostle Paul was not a physically impressive man. The spirituality of these men made them great, but this quality cannot be measured numerically because spirit involves many intangibles. Thus, the ultimate measure of a Christian is qualitative not quantitative. It is not a question of how many but of what sort.

Idolatry Most Subtle

Hosea 10:1-2 is an almost perfect foundation for understanding the erroneous judgment the Laodicean makes—and thus the substance of his spiritual problem. An additional historical reference in Amos adds perspective to this condition. Amos approaches Israel's spiritual problems from a somewhat different angle than Hosea. He shows the people as having all the forms of the true religion, yet because it lacks substance, they are well off but almost totally lacking in social justice. They take care of themselves but not their relationship with God or with their neighbors.

Hosea says that Israel "brings forth fruit for himself." In Revelation 3, Laodicea is contrasted to Philadelphia. The Philadelphian loves God and his brother, but the Laodicean loves himself as exhibited by what he spends his time doing. The Laodicean carries the name "Christian," but he is not serving the Lord Christ except in a most passive manner. He serves himself, which is why he says he needs nothing. He does not need even God! Laodiceanism is perhaps the most subtle of all forms of idolatry.

Jeremiah 48:11 contains another description of this affliction. In this case, it describes Moab, but the principle applies to Israel's and the Laodicean's condition: "Moab has been at ease from his youth; he has settled on his dregs [*on his lees*, KJV], and has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into captivity. Therefore his taste remained in him, and his scent has not changed." Zephaniah 1:12 adds a thought that gives a sense of the Laodicean's attitude: "And it shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and punish the men who are settled in complacency [*on their lees*, KJV], who say in their heart, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will He do evil.'"

We need to connect these two thoughts with the Laodicean's evaluation of himself and his relationship with God. If the Laodicean says he needs nothing, then he has settled on his lees. As we see from Christ's reaction, it angers Him greatly. The "lees," or dregs, are the sediment that forms during the fermentation of grapes. They eventually sink to the bottom and harden. Metaphorically, being settled on the lees indicates a floating, "take it easy" approach to life, which eventually sets into a lifestyle that is unacceptable to God.

A person settled on his lees is one who, through spiritual idleness and ease, gradually becomes morally indifferent, tolerant of his lack of spiritual drive, and ultimately hardened to God and sin. In the process, he becomes blind to his spiritual state. Zephaniah 1:12 concludes that such a one has reasoned himself into what amounts to a practical atheism. He says by his conduct that God is not really governing or judging; there will be neither reward for obedience nor punishment for sin.

So he gives himself over to whatever is his pleasure. It is not that he is notoriously immoral, but rather the Laodicean is a person straddling the proverbial fence. Though he has saving knowledge of God, he is also attached to the world and afraid to let go. He is deceived by the combination of his shallow knowledge of God and by his prosperity into thinking he has found the perfect balance. He has convinced himself he has the best of both.

No Borrowing of Character

The principle in Haggai 2:11-14 is vital for us to understand in this regard:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Now, ask the priests concerning the law, saying, 'If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?'" Then the priests answered and said, "No." And Haggai said, "If one who is unclean because of a dead body touches any of these, will it be unclean?" So the priests answered and said, "It shall be unclean." Then Haggai answered and said, "'So is this people, and so is this nation before Me,' says the Lord, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.'"

Uncleanness, or the defilement of this world, can be transferred from one person to another, but holiness cannot. Likewise, righteousness, character, and preparedness for God's Kingdom cannot be transferred from person to person because they represent internal qualities, matters of the heart.

Holy character and righteousness are personal matters, intangibles that accrue from spending long periods of time learning, applying, and honing spiritual skills in the daily experiences of life. It is too late when one needs a skill immediately, and it is not there. The same is true of character: It cannot be borrowed. Perhaps more importantly, we cannot borrow a relationship with God.

This ought to teach us that opportunity knocks and then passes. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), the foolish virgins fail to anticipate the possibility that the Bridegroom might come later than they expect. When they are awakened, there is no time to do anything except fill their own lamps. This proves that nobody can deliver his brother. Each person, within his relationship with God, determines his own destiny.

The Laodicean's faith, however, has become perfunctory. He attends church and is involved with brethren socially, but privately, he merely goes through the motions in much the same way as the Israelites did in Amos' day. Absent is the fervency that develops through careful analysis and evaluation of the world and its corrupt promises against God and His holy promises.

God shows that the unprepared will not be admitted to His Kingdom. We should not construe this as a calloused rejection of a person's perhaps lifelong desire, but we should realize that the Laodicean has rejected the Kingdom of God on a daily basis over a long time! God is not unfair in His judgment. He gives the Laodicean what he showed he wanted. God reciprocates in kind.

Perhaps we can understand God's judgment if we imagine what ours would be if we were engaged to someone who never prepares for our upcoming marriage. What person would want a wife or a husband who had no enthusiasm for the marriage? Or perhaps we can compare it to a person who meets someone who would make a wonderful mate, but despite having ample opportunity and mutual admiration, the relationship never develops due to the other's being constantly distracted.

Jesus instructs in Matthew 6:22-24, 33:

The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. . . . But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Loyalty cannot be divided between Christ and the world. Our purpose must be undivided singleness of mind, energetically given to seeking God, His Kingdom, and His righteousness as our first priority. This is the way we become one with God. This is the means by which we can work out our salvation (Philippians 2:12), thus ensuring that we can escape the plague of Laodiceanism and attend the Feast of Tabernacles again next year.