

HOW TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S LOVE AND FORGIVENESS • BILL BRIGHT

Jesus meant for the Christian life to be an exciting, abundant adventure. But most Christians do not know anything about this kind of life. To many the Christian life is a burden, a chore, a terrible cross to bear.

They have never experienced the victory that Christ can give. As I have had the privilege of speaking to thousands of Christians around the world in many lands, I have found that the average defeated, frustrated, fruitless Christian is not happy with his spiritual condition. He would like to change, but he does not know what to do. This kind of person does not need to be rebuked or criticized and condemned.

He knows he is headed in the wrong direction. He needs to be shown how to get turned around. He needs to understand the nature of his problem and how to find a solution to it. This is exactly what the Word of God provides for us.

In 1 Corinthians, Chapters 2 and 3, the apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, diagnoses the problem when he tells us that there are three kinds of people in the world—the natural man, the spiritual man and the carnal man.

The natural man is not a Christian. He depends upon his own resources and lives in his own strength. He cannot understand or accept the truths of God's Word. His interests and ambitions are centered in things fleshly and worldly. Spiritually, he is dead to God—dead in trespasses and sin.

The spiritual man, however, is a Christian who is controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit of God. He draws upon the unlimited resources of God's love and power and lives in the strength of the living Christ. He understands and believes God's Word, and his interests and ambitions are centered around and subject to the perfect will of God. Spiritually, he is alive. He is rejoicing in the Lord and bearing fruit for our Savior because he is allowing the Holy Spirit to have unhindered control of his life.

The carnal man, described by Paul in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 3, is a defeated and fruitless Christian. He is living in the energy of the flesh instead of drawing upon the inexhaustible resources of the Holy Spirit. He may be a Sunday school teacher, a salesman, a student, or even a minister or missionary who, even though he is a Christian, is in control at the same time.

The carnal man desires and sometimes attempts to set his affection on the things of God, but still holds on to the things of this world. He may assume that he knows what God wants him to be and may honestly try to live up to that self-made standard, only to fail again and again, because of rebellion, lack of information on the role of the Holy Spirit, or lack of faith. He never allows the Holy Spirit to mold him into the person that God created him to be. Thus, in endless frustration, he lives outside the perfect will of God.

How well I remember the years when I sought God with all my heart. I resorted to all kinds of self-imposed discipline, begging God for His power. The more I tried, the more defeated and frustrated I became. Then one day, I was studying the book of Romans. I read Chapter 8, verse 7 (Living Bible): "The old sinful nature within us is against God. It never did obey God's laws and it never will."

What a relief it was for me to discover that I would never be able to live the Christian life through my own self-efforts. My only hope for victory, power and fruitfulness was to trust Christ to live His resurrection life in and through me. He and He alone could enable me to live the Christian life (Col. 3:10). It is faith, not effort, that pleases Him (1 Peter 1:7; Hebrews 11:6).

Object of Faith

What is faith? Faith is another word for trust. Faith must have an object. The Christian's object of faith is God and His Word. And His Word tells us that we need not continue to be defeated, carnal, fruitless and impotent Christians. We can be fruitful witnesses for Christ, and that is what He has called us to be (John 15:16).

The Lord Jesus made the incredible but reliable promise that if we believe on Him, we will be able to do greater works than He did (John 14:12). He assured us that whatsoever we ask in His name, He will do it (John 14:14). No Christian need continue to be a carnal man.

It is important that we recognize that it is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the object of our faith, who has both the power and the willingness to deliver us from carnality.

We do not have faith in faith itself. For example, a person could have great faith that the ice on a lake would be thick enough to support his weight. Through his faith, he may walk boldly out on this ice and get very wet. On the other hand, a person who may have a very weak faith, may move slowly out onto a lake covered with a very thick layer of ice. As he walks on the ice and realizes its ability to support his weight, his faith grows.

So it is in the Christian life. We place our faith, even a faith that may be very weak, in a trustworthy God and His Word. The better we know God, the more we can trust Him, and the more we trust Him, the more we experience the reality of His love and grace and power. Faith is like a muscle—it grows with exercise.

Practical Atheists

A man booked passage on a ship with just enough money to buy a ticket, a block of cheese and some crackers for a long voyage. The first few days at sea the crackers and cheese tasted good, but eventually they became stale. As he watched the porters carry large steaks, lobsters, chicken, beautiful salads and many other delicious foods to the other guests, he became so hungry that he finally stopped one of the porters. "I'll do anything to get one of those steaks," he said. "I'll wash dishes, clean rooms, even mop the deck." The porter replied, "You bought a ticket, didn't you? The meals come with the ticket."

Too many people today are, ignorantly, cheese and cracker Christians—missing out on all of God's steak dinners.

It is tragically true that the average Christian is a practical atheist who professes to believe in God, yet acts as though God either does not exist or is unwilling to help him. All the resources of God are available to him, yet he lives in self-imposed spiritual poverty on a roller coaster of emotions. He fails to act as a child of the King or live as one who has been adopted into royalty from a state of poverty and illiteracy. How can the carnal man get off, and stay off, this emotional, roller coaster-type of existence and overcome his inconsistent way of life?

Spiritual Breathing. Consider the victorious fact stated by Paul in Colossians 1:13, 14: "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

These verses, along with the message of Hebrews chapter 10, assure us: When we enter God's kingdom by receiving His Son, then we can experience, moment-by-moment, the inner peace and freedom of His merciful forgiveness!

"Spiritual breathing" is a principle which enables the believer to live a consistent Christian life. Just as we exhale and inhale physically, so we can also exhale and inhale spiritually.

We "exhale" when we confess our sins, and we "inhale" when we appropriate the fullness of God's Spirit by faith. (This article deals with spiritual exhaling. Next month, we shall consider the concept of spiritual inhaling—how to be filled with God's Spirit as a way of life by faith.) The Bible promises, according to I John 1.9, "if we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Confession (homologeō in the Greek) suggests agreement with God concerning our sins. Such agreement involves at least three considerations. First, I acknowledge or agree with God that my sin or sins, which should be named specifically, are wrong and therefore are grievous to Him. Second, I acknowledge or agree with God that He has already forgiven my sins—past, present and future—because of Christ's death on the cross. It is essential to realize that there is nothing that I can do that will add anything to what He has already done for me. Third, I repent, which means that I change my attitude toward my sins. Through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, this will result in a change in my conduct. Instead of doing what my old sinful nature wants me to do, I now do what God wants me to do.

Short-Circuiting God's Power

One day, as I was playing with my son, operating the controls of his electric train, the train suddenly stopped running. I could not figure out what was wrong. I took the train apart and put it back together. I pushed the plug in and out of the socket, but nothing happened. Then I discovered the problem—a tiny piece of metal, a “no left turn” sign, had fallen across the positive and negative rails, short-circuiting all the electrical power generated for the vast city of Los Angeles, so the train would not run.

In like manner, sin short-circuits the power of God in the lives of Christians. God is holy and will have nothing to do with sin. But God loves us even though we may have unconfessed sins in our lives. He has forgiven us. All that we need to do to experience afresh the wonder of His love and the joy of His promises is to confess our sins—exhale spiritually—and experience the reality of His cleansing power.

Let me challenge you to perform a simple exercise now. Take a pencil and paper and list every sin in your life which the Holy Spirit calls to your remembrance. Take plenty of time; humble yourself before the Lord. Give God time to reveal to you those areas of your life which need to be corrected. Meditate on Psalms 32:1-6, and pray the prayer of Psalms 139:23, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test my thoughts. Point out anything you find in me that makes you sad...”

When you have written all that the Lord shows you to be wrong in your life, write across the list the wonderful promise of I John 1:9 quoted above. Now, destroy your list and thank God for His forgiveness and cleansing through the shedding of His Son's precious blood for your sins.

As you learn to breathe spiritually, i.e., exhale—confess, or agree with God concerning your sin, whenever you grieve or quench the Holy Spirit. Then, inhale—appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit on a moment-by-moment basis. You will experience true freedom and victory in the Christian life. Your life will become a great adventure, and you will become a fruitful witness for our Lord.