

Chapter 2 – From Misery to Bliss

For a couple of agonizing hours I lay on the floor behind my desk. It was almost 2 A.M. and I had no tears left. The pressure of anxiety that had built up over the previous year had been released in this unexpected burst of emotion.

Now I just felt tired and empty. In the stillness of the early morning hour, my thoughts turned to a piece of paper that someone had given me a few weeks earlier. I reached up to my computer desk, took the sheet, and began to read it. It was a quotation about absolute surrender to God. On one side was a list of things to commit to God. On the other side was a list of rights to give up—things like the right to success, the right to acceptance, the right to pleasant circumstances, the right to results. I took that paper and began to pray my way down the list. Lord, I'm tired of struggling for victory in my own life and I am tired of striving for success in my ministry. As I continued to pray, I chose to lay aside everything that had brought me a sense of worth: my efforts to have a growing church, my hunger for affirmation in ministry, my education, and my experience.

As I came to the bottom of the list, I read this paragraph:

I give God permission to do anything He wishes to me, with me, in me, or through me that would glorify Him. I once claimed these rights as mine, but now they belong to God and are under His control. He can do with them anything He pleases.

Although I didn't understand the full implications of absolute surrender, I signed my name below that paragraph. I sensed that this night was a turning point in my life and ministry. Before I finally went home to sleep, I wrote these words in my spiritual journal:

On this morning between midnight and 2:00 A.M., God's Holy Spirit has done a redemptive work in my heart by consuming me with Himself. Details are too personal and sacred to even write, but it is a work of His grace in me like nothing I have ever known in over eighteen years. May this be my "Ebenezer" to mark the moment of a life-altering encounter with Him. "Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, 'Thus far the LORD has helped us'" (1 Samuel 7:12).

When I left my office that morning, I didn't want a new program or plan. I wanted only one thing—Him. I stood up in church the next night and shared with the congregation how I had met with God the previous night. I told them that I felt led to suspend all programs and activity and simply begin to seek God. I shared with them that the Lord had impressed these words on my mind: "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Philippians 3:10). I told our church family that our need was not for a new and improved approach to ministry, but rather for a more intimate knowledge of God Himself.

God met with us in power that night, and my dear church family readily responded to the challenge. We began to pray much more as a church. We saturated our worship

services with prayer. We started a men's prayer meeting that met at 5:30 A.M. each Tuesday. Our women began to come together to pray. Our Sunday school classes began to seek the Lord in earnest. God was working out the same process in our church life that He was accomplishing in my personal life—He was bringing us to the place of brokenness.

I Can Do It Myself

Through the sense of failure I experienced, God was bringing me to the end of self-sufficiency. Before I even came to my new place of ministry, I had begun to earnestly pray that He would use my life in a greater way than ever.

Unknown to me, the church where God sent me had also been praying that He would use them in a supernatural way. God put us together and allowed circumstances to develop in such a way that He brought us to the end of our own resources. He kept on until all we had left was Him. And that's not a bad place to be!

We have all learned to rely on our own strategies for getting our needs met. The Bible calls this mechanism for servicing our own needs the flesh. Every person has developed his flesh-life in order to get what he wants out of life as much of the time as possible. Don't think of flesh as skin, but as personal techniques for meeting your own perceived needs, apart from Christ. Your flesh-life may not be defiant toward God. Walking after the flesh is simply relying on your own ability instead of on God's resources. Don't think of the flesh as

something that you naturally find repulsive. It may be very attractive and even look spiritual.

Paul said that Christians should place no confidence in the flesh. Then he describes his own flesh patterns:

I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ (Philippians 3:3-7).

If you want to talk about credentials, Paul had them. Yet he said that these enviable qualifications had not proven to be assets, but liabilities. How can natural abilities become liabilities? It happens when we rely on those abilities instead of on Christ. Our flesh develops its own unique patterns because of factors that have influenced our lives. They might be connected to our talents, appearance, wealth, education, or countless other things that we rely on to get through life. Saul of Tarsus had his flesh-life wrapped up in a religious package. Many Christians do the same. It is not uncommon for a Christian to try to get his need for acceptance and approval met by what he does at church.

Remember that a good synonym for flesh may be self-sufficiency. It is God's purpose to bring us to the place where we rest totally in the sufficiency of Christ within us in every situation. Yet we have all learned how to handle life's circumstances by what we do ourselves.

Many Americans believe that God helps those who help themselves. And sadly, many Christians have spiritualized that same false philosophy and concluded that God will bless us as we “do our part.” For much of my life, I dedicated my abilities and my efforts to God. I tried hard to do something for God. I often prayed, “Lord, bless my efforts as I serve You.”

However, the New Testament model of a Christian is not one who dedicates his own work to God. Rather it is the story of God Himself doing the work through a person totally yielded to Him.

It would be bad enough if the worst thing said about self-sufficiency was that it had no spiritual value in the Christian life. However, that would leave the impression that self-sufficiency is inconsequential, which is not the case. Trying to do something for God may sound admirable, but it produces damaging consequences. Consider the man who is known as the father of faith. When Abraham heard that he and Sarah were going to have a son, they were really excited. As the years passed and Sarah still didn’t conceive, they decided to help God fulfill His promise.

“Sarah,” Abraham might have said, “I’ve been thinking. God told me that we were going to have a son, but perhaps we’ve been looking at this thing the wrong way. Maybe we should do everything we know to do and then trust that God will do the rest.” “You know, I’ve been having similar thoughts, Abe. Maybe God is going to do this in a different way than we first understood. Have you considered that the promised child might come through our servant, Hagar?” “Well, to tell the truth, that

thought had crossed my mind, Sarah. After all, we have to do our part.”

You know the rest of the story. Abraham did go to Hagar and she did conceive. However, Ishmael was not the son God had promised. The son of promise would come through Sarah, and it would happen on God’s timing. Abraham and Sarah were sincere, but they really made a mess of things. They were trying to do something to help God. One result of their self-sufficiency gives cause for the ongoing conflict between the Arabs and the Jews. All because Abraham and Sarah thought that God would bless their efforts to help Him.

During my senior year of high school, I worked in a nursing home. A part of my responsibility was to lift men from their wheelchairs into their beds. One evening I went into a man’s room to help him into bed. He weighed in at about 200 pounds against my 130 pounds. Although I was thin, I knew how to lift a patient. I had been taught how to position myself in front of the wheelchair and place my hands under his arms with my legs on each side of his knees. I would then lift the patient and swing him around to the bed and set him down. It usually worked well, but not this time.

When I had Mr. Daniels up and about halfway between the chair and the bed, he decided to “help” me. His intent was to stand up, but that’s not what happened. Instead, he stiffened his whole body like a wooden plank. His feet shot out in front of him and he began to struggle. “Relax!” I told him. “I’m holding your weight. Just let me do it.” But he didn’t trust me. In his effort to stand up, he pulled himself away from my grip and fell to the

floor. To make matters worse, he whacked me with the cane hanging on his chair! I tried to warm up to him in the days that followed, but he never would let me get too close to him again. There wouldn't have been a problem if he just hadn't tried to help.

Self-sufficient living always produces conflict. I know now that Melanie was right. I never would have been satisfied with life if the focus of my Christian experience had remained on doing what I believed was necessary to please God. I experienced peace only after I learned to focus on the person of Christ, instead of on what I **should** be doing for Him.

Are you struggling in your spiritual life? In order to experience genuine peace, it is necessary to come to the place where you no longer rely on your self-sufficient techniques and patterns. You probably won't give up easily, because you have relied on those resources all your life. So God may allow the weight of adverse circumstances to become greater than the strength of your flesh. And when this happens, it will hurt!

Don't Tell Me That God Won't Put More on Me Than I Can Bear!

You have probably heard all your life that God won't put any burden on you greater than you can bear. Don't mark me off as a heretic just yet, but I don't believe it. I believe that God will put heavier burdens on you than you can bear, especially when He is trying to bring you to the place of brokenness. God will allow the burden to be greater than you can bear so that you will finally allow Him to bear it for you. God's purpose in the

breaking process is to bring you to the end of your own resources so that you will be ready to understand that He is the only resource you need in life. As long as your own abilities are sufficient to rise to the challenge, you will never understand that He doesn't just give strength. He is your Strength. In the breaking process, God has no intention of helping you get stronger. He wants you to become so weak that He can express Himself as the strength you need in every situation.

If you have prayed for God to use your life, don't be surprised when trouble comes. Remember, the trouble is intended to strip you of self-sufficiency, a necessary step before God can use you to the fullest. Many times I prayed for God to help with my circumstances and wondered why things didn't seem to get any better. In retrospect, I can see that God was helping by allowing things to get darker.

I wanted Him to change the circumstances. He wanted to accomplish His purpose in the circumstances. When you pray for God to help with your situation and things don't get any better, remember that He knows what He is doing!

Just because you can't see His hand doesn't mean He isn't working. He may be using the situation to break that outer shell of self-reliance that keeps the life of Christ from being expressed through your lifestyle. No Christian can ever live to full potential until that happens. As Watchman Nee says,

We must know that he who can work for God is the one whose inward man can be released. The basic difficulty

of a servant of God lies in the failure of the inward man to break through the outward man. Therefore, we must recognize before God that the first difficulty to our work is not in others but in ourselves. Our spirit seems to be wrapped in a covering so that it cannot easily break forth. If we have never learned how to release our inward man by breaking through the outward man, we are not able to serve. Nothing can so hinder us as the outward man. Whether our works are fruitful or not depends upon whether our outward man has been broken by the Lord so that the inward man can pass through the brokenness and come forth. This is the basic problem. The Lord wants to break our outward man in order that the inward man may have a way out. When the inward man is released, both unbelievers and Christians will be blessed.

While this breaking process is painful, it cannot be avoided if a Christian is to experience maximum usefulness in the ministry of Christ. As a pastor, I have seen a consistent flow of people who come through my office for counseling. I can't count the number of times when people who are experiencing pain in their lives have expressed this frustration: "I don't understand what is happening. I have asked God to use my life and I really meant it. But it seems like the more I try to do what He wants me to do, the harder things become." Have you ever felt this way?

Let's evaluate this expression of pain in light of the breaking process.

"I don't understand what is happening." We have all felt that way, haven't we? It is important to know that it is

not necessary to always understand what is going on in our lives. The doctrine of God's sovereignty reminds us that He understands. Sometimes that is all we have to sustain us. However, many times there can be some understanding of what is happening when we hurt. "I have asked God to use my life and I really meant it." Now this is where an understanding of our problems can begin to emerge. If we have sincerely asked God to use us, He will respond to that prayer. But we need to remember the truth about brokenness: God cannot use a Christian to fullest potential until that person has come to the end of confidence in personal abilities.

So He allows problems to come into our lives that are greater than our abilities can solve. Don't miss this point, because it is fundamental. If we have sincerely prayed for God to use us, He must cause us to come to the place where we have no confidence in the flesh. Adverse circumstances may be the hand of God working to bring us to the end of self-sufficiency.

"But it seems like the more I try to do what He wants me to do, the harder things become." Few of us want to live with adversity. Do you remember the definition already given for the flesh? Flesh refers to our self-effort to cope with life, relying on our own abilities. An unbroken Christian is accustomed to trying to live for God. He often rededicates himself to the Lord and determines to try to do what He wants.

God's purpose is not that we should rededicate our self with all its abilities, but that we should give up all hope in self. We sometimes try to live **for** Him when He wants to live His life **through** us. It is important to see

the distinction here. To ask God to help us live for Him is to request some sort of divine blessing on our effort to “do what He wants us to do.” But that isn’t what God desires. He isn’t interested in what we can do for Him. Christ is interested in living His life through us.

Is there a difference? You bet! It’s the difference between law and grace. Law will cause a person to say, “Lord, help me to do the things You want me to do.” In other words, “Help me keep Your rules.” Grace will cause a person to say, “Lord Jesus, I am abiding in You and You in me. Express Your life through me in any way You desire.” It isn’t uncommon for Christians to think that God has a long list of things He wants His children to do. But in 1 Thessalonians 5:24 we read, “He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.” Not only does Christ call us to the Christian life, but He will also live it for us. After all, who else could live the Christ-life except Christ?

When God determines to bring us to brokenness so that Christ can live His life through us and we keep trying to live it ourselves, things will keep getting harder. When does it stop? When we reach the end of our self-sufficiency and have given up all hope in our own resources. Peter Lord has said, “Wouldn’t it be awful to spend all your life trying to make God an apple pie, only to die and discover He never liked apple pie?” God wants to bring us to the understanding that we weren’t saved to do something for God. We were saved so that we might know Him in intimate daily fellowship. Do good works have a place in the Christian life? Of course! But they are an overflow of our relationship with Him, an evidence of His life being expressed through us.

The Danger of Service

Being preoccupied with serving Christ more than with Jesus Himself is a subtle threat to every Christian. Even one very close to Jesus during His earthly ministry fell into this trap. When Jesus came to visit Mary and Martha in their home at Bethany, Mary sat down at the feet of Jesus and listened intently to every word He spoke. Martha was busy doing things in the home to make His visit more enjoyable. Whether she was cooking or preparing His room, she felt uptight because company was in the house and she wanted to be a good hostess. As she hurried around, she couldn't help but notice Mary sitting there talking while she was doing all the work.

But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:40-42).

Martha was stressed out while Mary was resting. People for whom Christian living is strictly service-oriented often get impatient with those whose level of measurable activity is not as intense. Luke says that Martha was "distracted." Distracted from what? From Jesus! What was it that caused her attention to be distracted from Jesus? You got it— serving Him! It was a startling revelation in my own life when the Holy Spirit showed

me that I had become more preoccupied with the work of the ministry than with the One who called me to it. Busyness in serving Christ will block intimacy with Him.

Jesus could have said to Martha, “Now calm down. What you are doing is good, but what Mary is doing is important too. Both serving and resting have their proper place. Martha, you need to learn balance.” Yet that isn’t what He said. Instead, He said, “But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.” How many things? One thing is needed—resting in Him. Does this statement minimize the importance of serving Jesus? Not at all. How do you suppose Mary would have responded if Jesus had asked her to bring Him a glass of water? She would immediately have sprung into action. On the other hand, if He had asked Martha for a glass of water, she might not have even heard Him because she was too busy making His bed—and He wasn’t even sleepy! Do you see the point? Resting in Christ is the sole responsibility of the Christian. Everything else flows out of that.

Frank came into my office one morning before church. “Steve, I need to talk to you. Lately, I’ve been miserable. I teach Sunday school; I’m a deacon in the church; I sing in the choir; I serve on the finance committee. I’m doing everything I know to do for God, but I’m still unhappy. What’s wrong with me?”

Having just looked at Mary and Martha, what would you say might be his problem? Frank felt like Martha, worried and troubled about many things. Busy, but unfulfilled. I’ve been there—haven’t you? Does it ever

seem that the more you try to live for God, the harder things become?

I too had been busy trying to serve God, and I was frustrated and anxious. In fact, when I lay on the floor of my office crying in misery, it felt like hell. But I can look back now and see that God was getting me ready to experience a taste of heaven on earth.