

Not On Our Own

Christ In Us

*I sought the Lord,
and he answered me;
he delivered me
from all my fears.
Those who look to him
are radiant;
their faces are never covered
with shame.
This poor man called,
and the Lord heard him;
he saved him
out of all his troubles.
The angel of the Lord encamps
around those
who fear him,
and he delivers them.
Taste and see
that the Lord is good;
blessed is the man
who takes refuge in him.
Psalm 34:4-8*

Conditions weren't the best. There had been little rain that spring, and the tall brush left over from the previous year had not yet been replaced with new, greener growth. Everything was dry, and it had been windy earlier that morning. But the brush pile was already tall—and I was adding even more as I trimmed trees around the property. The wind had died down, and I had mowed a wide margin around the pile, so it seemed safe to burn the existing refuse, making room for more.

Small and contained in a fireplace, flames can be a pleasant sight as they warm cold bones and make cozy a chilled room. Their familiar crackle and snap delight our senses and draw us closer to the warmth. But there is nothing cozy or delightful about a wall of flame shooting skyward. It does not invite, but repels; it does not pleasantly crackle and snap, but roars, shoving us away with a fierce, all-consuming anger.

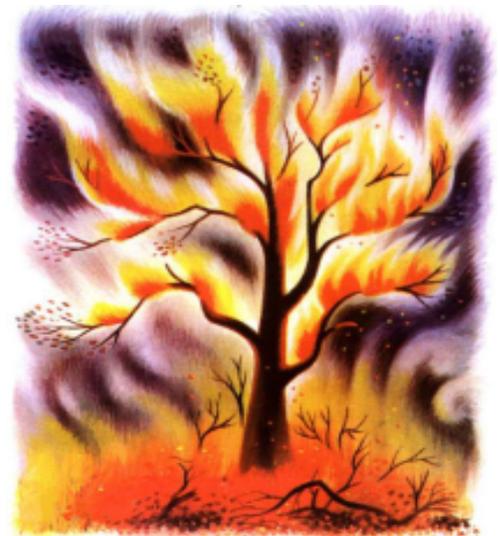
The old pile of last year's branches went up quickly, the tower of flames lifting high, and very hot. Suddenly, in the midst of relative calm, an errant gust of wind whipped out of the south, and immediately a new fire roared to life across the margin of safety. The flames exploded in the tall, dry weeds and, with the south wind pushing, began moving north and east, consuming everything in their path.

I was alone on the property in that spring of 1997, and I knew in an instant that I needed help. I raced to the house and summoned the local volunteer fire department, then returned to the fire.

The flames were traveling north and east, moving into the broad field in front of our house that sloped down for a quarter mile to the gravel road in the north, and our drive in the east.

It's speed was frightening, and as it rounded the corner of the fence line, it first threatened a stand of conifers in the north-west corner of the front lawn.

Feeling like a small ant doing battle against a swarm of locusts, I dove into the brush and began shoveling dirt onto the flames that licked closer to the base of the evergreens. I was holding my own, but felt overwhelmed by the size and speed of the threatening conflagration. I knew I could never keep pace with the flames running along the other



Aspects

Encouraging believers to know
God and His ways,
and to enjoy a more intimate
communion with Him

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side of the fence. My thoughts were prayers, and for that eternity I realized I could only place myself in His hands.

I had no previous experience with the Winterset fire department, but knew it to be comprised of volunteers—men who were summoned from their day jobs by the tornado siren situated near the fire station in town. And I heard that welcome siren—from five miles out in the country—just moments after I placed my call for help. It was a sweet sound that spurred me on, knowing that help was on the way. Having observed the drill before while in town to buy groceries, I knew that one of the local police officers would be stopping traffic at the busy intersection near the fire station, as the men arrived to don their gear and head out to the fire. Conversations in homes and businesses for blocks would be halted as the piercing wail of the siren overwhelmed every other sound. Things would happen quickly and efficiently, and within minutes the firemen would be on their way.

Still, it seemed a long forever before they arrived. But then I spied the first truck in the distance, heading my way down on the gravel road, and my entreaties turned to praise as they turned onto our property. Apparently the men came as they could, not waiting to form into a whole. The first vehicle was a small jeep carrying two men and a large water tank. Sweat running down my face and my eyes stinging from the smoke, I met them up where the drive was near an opening in the fence. I pointed out my concern about the conifers, and they took off to douse the flames that were threatening the large trees.

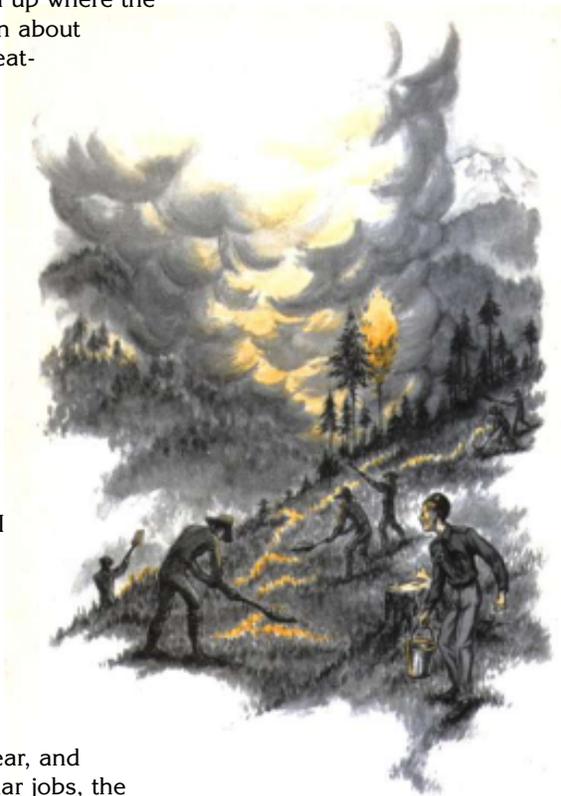
The main body of the fire was now curving around to threaten our new orchard—but more men were arriving. One truck stopped halfway up the drive and a man leaped over the barbed wire fence, hauling a hose behind him, to attack the flames that threatened another stand of evergreens. Then another truck, and finally the large tanker—the only vehicle that actually looked like a fire truck—arrived. And in no time my solitary efforts, so pitiful and futile, had been replaced by an efficient force of experienced firefighters working in unison to extinguish the flames that threatened our property.

I wanted to kiss every one of them. Wishing to help, I realized I would just be in the way. All I could do was move about the area ‘supervising’ as these good men went about their work. But then I thought of something I *could* do for them. I ran to the house and filled a cooler with ice and sodas, then dropped it into the trunk of my VW. Traveling about the area, I offered the refreshments to the overheated, but appreciative firefighters. I would have fixed them all lunch and dinner, if they had stayed.

But soon the crisis was past, and all that remained was a hillside blackened with soot, and a few smoldering trees down in the ravine that paralleled the road. As they packed up their gear, and the trucks began heading back toward town and the men’s regular jobs, the chief took my name and address for his report. Then they were gone.

As I stood at the top of the hill surveying the damage, I remembered how it had felt, huddled against the heat and flames, fighting the blaze on my own. I knew then—as I know now—that I would never have made it on my own. The fierce inferno was more powerful, more brutal than I, and would have traveled about at will, ultimately consuming far more than it did. If the wind had shifted, the flames could have traveled from tree to tree toward the house, and set it ablaze.

Standing there, alone, I shuddered with the thought of what might have been—how helpless I had been against the superior foe. And I offered up one more prayer of praise and grateful thanksgiving.



An Unspent Force

*You are from God, little children, and have overcome (the evil spirits); because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.
1 John 4:4 nasb*

**He comforts the elect with a most sure hope of victory: but yet so, that he teaches them that they fight not with their own power, but with the virtue and power of God.
Theodore Beza**

Our foe is not more powerful than the Christ who lives within believers, but he is, indeed, more powerful than the most righteous believer fighting on his own. A myth of invincibility can overtake those in Christ, leading them to believe that since they belong to Him, they can easily stand against the wily Father of Lies. But that myth is from the pit—just another of Satan’s lies.

It is not the believer who overcomes the opposition, but the One who dwells *within* the believer. We add nothing to the power of Christ as He overcomes Satan on our behalf.

Some people may think of the indwelling of Christ like an inoculation. As children, we receive a series of immunization shots that inoculate us against certain diseases. Having received a particular inoculant, we then become immune to its associated disease. Before Linda and I went to Africa, we received a series of shots that immunized us against diseases inherent to the countries in which we would be traveling. Having had those shots beforehand, we could travel with confidence, enjoying the sights and sounds of foreign lands without concern for our health.

But this isn’t what happens when we take Christ Jesus as our Savior. He is not a one-time inoculant, immunizing us against any future attacks by the enemy of His grace. He is, instead, a *superior force put at our disposal*.

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Ephesians 6:10-11 nkjv

Like the human brain or mind, Christ is capable of impacting our life in ways too grand and wonderful for words—if we only choose to let Him. In some individuals we see a glimmer of the human mind’s expansive potential: Leonardo da Vinci, Stephen W. Hawking, Aristotle, Buckminster Fuller, Albert Einstein. But the average person taps into only a mere fraction of the mind’s capacity. Vast hallways of gray matter go to the grave unspent because an individual didn’t bother with the potential that lay dormant within his own brain.

Jesus brings to a life an endless storehouse of potential that most people leave unspent. Most believers take to their grave an embarrassing wealth of unused power—power that had always been available to them, but they either didn’t know or didn’t care that it was there.

If we think of Christ, living within us, as a one-shot deal—that once He is in residence, He has accomplished everything from His repertoire—then we are missing out on untold power against evil, and limitless vistas of unbounded joy.

Standing Under the Weight

And then it snowed.

We awoke early one Sunday morning in October of 1997 to a winter wonderland. The winter of '97 began early that year. It struck with a pretty vengeance that caught everyone off guard. At first glance, at least, it was a beautiful sight. An active, pre-season blizzard in process, the wet snow swirled and blew almost parallel to the ground, pasting white splotches to the trees. Then, leaving just enough time for us to rise and wash, the power skipped off. No lights, no heat, no cooking, no running water.

Then the storm became uglier. With most of the trees still wearing their leaves, the wet heavy snow had plenty of surface area to coat, which placed unbearable weight upon the branches. With already six inches on the ground, the snow continued to pelt down, splattering its weight upon everything in its path. And in only a few hours the land around our house resembled a battleground.

Small branches, larger cousins, thick tree limbs periodically crashed to the ground. Ice scattered, pelting the windows. Mature fruit trees, still bearing apples ready to be picked, split in two and groaned down to the soil. Bushes collapsed under the white strain. Later in the day loud crashes pronounced the death of whole oak trees, one dipping its uppermost branches into the pond.

Less than twenty-four hours earlier we had been surrounded by strong, vigorous trees, thickly trunked monuments to good health and longevity. But in just a few hours of aberrant weather our property was reduced to a war zone, with casualties littering the landscape.



For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!
1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-12

Our lives can consist, for the most part, of one benign event after another. We go about our daily business healthy and strong, vigorous, filled with confidence. We handle the small things, and with only a little more effort handle the larger things. Life is good; *we* are good. In the vernacular of the church, we are *blessed*.

Through our confident success we become impervious to our own vulnerabilities. Like our unsaved friends, who “professing to be wise... became fools” (Romans 1:22 nkjv), we puff up with our own competence—until some one or some thing comes along with a sharp point to let out all the hot air.

This all appears simple in theory, but the apostle tells us that in order to enter into it, we must let God “strengthen [us] with power through his Spirit in [our] inner being.” This divine filling requires a vessel that can hold it—a vessel supernaturally strengthened. You cannot put a charge of high explosives into a pocket pistol. You want a strong chamber that can bear the blast of so much concentrated power.

Similarly, God needs strong vessels for His power. In order to prepare us to be these vessels, He must take us out of our own strength and place us into the strength of Christ. Our mere natural capacities cannot receive Jesus. The highest intellect, the strongest brain, is unequal to this experience. But the humblest capacity, when strengthened by the Holy Spirit, may experience this divine filling.

Even after we have received Christ’s indwelling, there are depths and heights in “all the fullness of God” in which we more perfectly enter, in proportion as we allow the Holy Spirit to fit us for the deeper and higher experience. This is often what our severest trials are meant for—to give our spirit a vigor and a capacity that will enable us to rise to a higher place in the fellowship.

A.W. Tozer

One day some force happens along and drops its load on our life. Out of the blue, we’re suddenly brought low under the crushing weight of tragedy or loss, despair—even a powerful temptation resulting in an unspeakable sin. We are, we realize after all, only dust.

And David became famous after he returned from striking down eighteen thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt. He put garrisons throughout Edom, and all the Edomites became subject to David. The Lord gave David victory wherever he went. David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people. 2 Samuel 8:13-15

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful... 2 Samuel 11:2

How we respond to these untimely inconveniences speaks volumes about who we are—and from whom we have gained our strength of character. Even Christians may be listening to the wrong voices; even believers may be giving allegiance to the wrong authorities who will—either immediately or eventually—undermine their ability to stand.

God has ways of dealing with people who have determined to live life on their own terms—people who have mislaid the knowledge that their success is from Him. Those ways may bring momentary annoyance, or life-changing sorrow. It’s His call.

There is only one Life that instills in us the strength of character and profitable dependency to ensure that when the storm blast hits, we will be left still standing. There is only one Life that strengthens with love, builds up with reproof, and encourages with mercy.

That life’s name is Jesus Christ the Lord.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9-11

*Dying with Jesus, by death reckoned mine;
Living with Jesus, a new life divine;
Looking to Jesus till glory doth shine,
Moment by moment, O Lord, I am Thine.*

*Never a trial that He is not there,
Never a burden that He doth not bear,
Never a sorrow that He doth not share,
Moment by moment I’m under His care.*

*Never a heartache and never a groan,
Never a teardrop and never a moan;
Never a danger, but there on the throne,
Moment by moment, He thinks of His own.*

*Never a weakness that He doth not feel,
Never a sickness that He cannot heal;
Moment by moment, in woe or in weal,
Jesus, my Saviour, abides with me still.*

*Moment by moment I’m kept in His love;
Moment by moment I’ve life from above;
Looking to Jesus till glory doth shine;
Moment by moment, O Lord, I am Thine.*

Daniel W. Whittle

The Highest and Best

"But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you." John 16:7,13-15

Jesus Christ is, indeed, part of the life of every believer. In practical terms, however, He is bodily, physically absent. Jesus is at this moment physically in the presence of the Father. There, at the right hand of God the Father, He speaks on our behalf as our advocate.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 1 John 2:1

In His stead, Jesus left with us, as His agent, the Holy Spirit, who faithfully represents the word and presence of Christ. So in practical terms, "life in Christ" is synonymous with "living by the Spirit." Listening and being guided by the latter is the same as living in the former.

The inhabitation of the Holy Spirit does not ensure that we will proceed under His power. Like the other members of the Godhead, the Spirit is a gracious, courteous dweller. Knowing His way is superior, He patiently waits for us to agree.

Because we have been given the gift of free will, we are free to live outside of His Spirit. The believer who refuses to live by the Spirit is swimming upstream, of course, against the current. God is committed to pouring His blessings into our life, and He does this through the Spirit connection. When we determine to live outside of that connection, we short-circuit the life He wishes to have flow into our life.

We do not live by the Spirit by depending on our own power and abilities, but rather by giving up those gifts to a higher power. The key to living by the Spirit is *surrender*.

But there's the rub. If there is anything that stands against the popular philosophy of today it is the concept of surrendering one's independence to a greater authority. It's simply not done—not voluntarily, at least. But our lives will not become spiritual until we let go of the physical. We will not tap into the power of God—who is a Spirit—until we become a part of the limitless spiritual world that surrounds us. As Tozer points out, it is within reach, but it waits.

From my desk I look out over a short slope that goes down to the pond behind our home. Beyond the pond are the woods—at this time of year a dense jungle of green-leafed trees, bushes, and tall weeds and grass. In the woods live myriad birds, deer, raccoon, possums, squirrels and chipmunks, wild turkeys, and other beasts of which I am not yet aware. From my desk I don't see them; I see only a heavy curtain of green. But I know they live in there because they emerge from time to time.

"But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." Luke 22:69

A spiritual kingdom lies all about us, enclosing us, embracing us, altogether within reach of our inner selves, waiting for us to recognize it. God Himself is here waiting our response to His presence. This eternal world will come alive to us the moment we begin to reckon upon its reality. A.W. Tozer

If one day I decide to pay the animals a visit, I could open the gate behind the barn and go crashing through the underbrush astride my tractor. The tractor would conveniently smash through the brush, making my progress easier. In fact, if it really became too dense even for it, I could take along my chain saw, which would make short work of the low branches that impede my progress.

All of that might get me in to where the beasts live, but once there I would find myself very much alone. Entering the woods on my own, very physical terms would virtually guarantee a solitary vigil.

I could, however, choose to enter the woods more on the terms of its inhabitants. I could climb over the gate and quietly enter the dense stand of trees on foot. I would carefully go around obstacles instead of crashing through them, and even step where my footfalls would make little noise. I would be silent and move cautiously, becoming one with the dense vitality of the forest.

Entering the woods like this, I would soon be serenaded by songbirds and the melodic croaking of frogs. Pheasants would screech from the neighboring field, and turkeys would gobble and strut within a few yards of my position. Deer would browse the lower branches in my line of sight, and possums would waddle by dragging their naked, rat-like tails. Antic squirrels would leap from branch to branch overhead, complaining and scolding, but making me feel at home in their world. Quietly, a little at a time, I would become one with my surroundings.

We do not live “in Christ” or live “by the Spirit” by physical means. Jesus told the woman at the well that human beings do not choose the manner by which they acceptably worship the Lord God, but must, instead, offer their worship in a manner pleasing to its object.

“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” John 4:23-24

In the same way, we cannot choose the manner by which we live by the Spirit; it is a spiritual world that must be entered on its own terms. This means that living by the Spirit is not accomplished by attending church, serving on the Building and Grounds Committee, teaching Sunday School, or taking your favorite casserole to the potluck dinner. Living by the Spirit is not accomplished by forcing oneself to read through the Bible in a year, or by stopping work every day at ten o’clock to pray.

All of these activities may be associated with the Spiritual life, but they are not—in themselves—Spiritual. Spirit-living means that we are *energized* by the Holy Spirit; that is the *first* milestone of the journey, not the last. Church activities do not guarantee spirituality any more than driving a four-wheel drive vehicle into the woods guarantees a chance to listen to wildlife. “Busy-ness”—even at church—more often drives away spirituality.

Living in Christ is no more complicated, and no less grand, than simply taking God at His word and living as close to Him on a regular basis as is humanly possible. It is not the product of cold reason, but it is brokenness: it is humility and dependency, it is bowing before Him in utter honesty and openness to declare our love and devotion. It is thanksgiving for the beauty that surrounds us, it is reminding ourselves of His hand in everything that comes our way, it is considering Him to be our highest and best teacher of everything there is to know.

In one sense, “*living* by the Spirit” is coming to grips with the fact that God, through the Holy Spirit, is the root source of and sustaining power behind our very existence; “*walking* by the Spirit” is how that knowledge is played out in our daily life.

And in both, God is preeminent.



Aspects

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