

ARE YOU AN ORPHAN OR A SON?

(Edited and adapted from a sermon by Dr. C. John Miller)

Of the many questions Paul asks in his letter to the Galatians one that is quite significant but often overlooked is, “Whatever happened to all your joy?” (4: 15, NIV) I can relate to that personally. At the time of my conversion, I was brought to a deep conviction of sin while reading Ephesians 1. My insistence on autonomy and self-sufficiency crashed head on into the sovereignty of God. As I recoiled at the thought of God sovereignly dispensing His grace solely as He willed, without consideration of human merit or cooperation, it crossed my mind, “Just who does He think he is?” Slowly it dawned on me: He thinks He is God. And I realized that I had been thinking and acting as though *I* were God. The pride and arrogance of it was overwhelming. A deep conviction of my sinfulness came over *me*; but as I was cut to the quick, I was also overcome with incredible joy at the realization that God in His grace had predestined a sinner such as myself to be adopted as his son through Jesus Christ (Eph.1 :5). The reality of God’s holy otherness and my sinfulness led me to repentance that unleashed a great joy in the discovery of God’s great grace and mercy.

But I’ve lost my joy many times since then. I think the first time it occurred to me that something was wrong was when I was planting my first church in California. Driving down the street to call on a church member I noticed a group of teen-aged boys abusing a white haired old lady – they were throwing stones at her and cat-calling. I could hardly believe it. I intervened on behalf of the old woman. Among other things, I gave them a good dose of the 5th commandant – honour your father and mother. But as I talked to them I began to realize I didn’t know what to say. Finally in desperation I pointed to our church steeple down the street and said, “I expect to see all of you in church on Sunday.”

Of course, I didn’t expect to see any of them. But they did come, and I realized I didn’t know what to do with them! These rebellious young men didn’t fit the profile of my Christianity. I knew the church didn’t know what to do with them either. I had little to offer them but Christian moralism. I had the Ten Commandments to give them. I certainly didn’t have a gospel of joy unleashing forgiveness to offer them.

I had a lot of preoccupation with ministry, family needs, finances, and there certainly wasn’t any overflow of joy in my life. Essentially, I had become turned in on myself. Mostly because of hardness of heart, and the pressures of ministry, I had drifted into isolation from God; I had developed a kind of “orphan spirit” by becoming disconnected from the grace of God. This was a radical departure from the joy and freedom I knew as a young Christian.

What had happened to all my joy? Like the Galatians, I who had begun my Christian life in the joy and freedom of the Spirit through simply believing the gospel (Gal.3:1-5), had forgotten the power of grace and the wonder of sonship. Galatians 4:4-7 tells us we are no longer under law, no longer under condemnation, no longer slaves (to the “basic principles of the world, 4:3), and no longer orphans: we have received “the full rights of sons.” This “no longer” is really

God's norm for the Christian. But we often lose that freedom and sense of favour with God, and the corresponding delight in Him. Like the Galatians, we so often trade in the gospel of free justification and adoption for a work oriented version that differs little practically from Roman Catholicism. We forget, we fail to appreciate, and we fail to appropriate, on an everyday basis, that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, taking upon himself the curse which was ours, in order to set us free as sons of God. For freedom He has set us free (Gal. 3:13-14; 5:1). Why are so many then without this freedom and joy?

Because we are orphans. Think of it this way: an orphan is someone who has *lost touch with the grace of God*. The orphan has a small gospel and a small Christ. Seeing little of their own desperate moral, spiritual and intellectual bankruptcy before God, they see little need for the glorious sacrificial atonement of Christ.

If I might illustrate this, consider how critical we tend to be. We are critical; we glory in our ability to judge and assess and evaluate. We evaluate everything. But we often function as though we are immune to the Holy Spirit's criticism. And God is the only one who is entitled to evaluate, and his evaluation was written on the cross at Calvary. His judgment is: "False and full of sin, all unrighteousness, worthy only of eternal wrath. But now, redeemed, forgiven, accepted; I brought you to Myself and you didn't do a thing towards it. It was all my love, my doing, my glory."

The son, as opposed to the orphan, is one who knows this grace. He has seen the severe criticism of the cross of Christ and the radical embrace of God through that same cross. He can give up his judging and criticizing and instead glory in nothing but the cross of Christ that brought about his salvation and keeps it alive even now.

Our sinful nature is opposed to glorying in the cross every bit as much as it is prone toward criticism of others. This was illustrated to me at a church planters conference at which I was speaking. As part of my lessons I had the pastors break into small groups and gave them the assignment to preach the gospel to each other. They looked completely befuddled! The whole program broke down. They exclaimed, "Don't you think we are saved?" Actually, their shocked response did give me pause to question! Were they so cut off from the gospel that they didn't know what it was to preach it to one another? Reading Paul's letter we see him constantly laying forth the gospel, for Christians! For him it was deep, deep music that he played over and over. I said to these pastors, "Brothers, have you lost the music? Isn't the gospel precious to you? Isn't it as important today as when you first believed? Do you think the gospel is a song you play only once when you become a Christian? No. We need to preach it, hear it, sing it to ourselves every day."

The gospel should revive us every day. Consider that great hymn, "Arise my soul arise; shake off thy guilty fears." How do we do that? The next line contains the answer: "The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears." Wesley goes on to say, "Before the throne my surety stands."

There before the throne of God Christ pleads for me on the basis of his shed blood. And more than that, his perfect righteousness appears on my behalf! I now live on the basis of his life given for me and revealed in the gospel. *This* is where true freedom and joy are found.

Leaders are not the only ones who lose touch with the gospel. Our churches are filled with lay people who walk through life feeling that they just do not and can not measure up. A few years ago, in one of our Sonship seminars, a woman approached us with a problem she had stemming back from problems with her father as a child. One incident poignantly illustrated her relationship, as well as the way many ordinary believers relate to the heavenly Father. Seeing her older brothers and sisters helping, she was eager to help her mum with her father's laundry. She said: "One day I took one of his white shirts and I couldn't reach the clothes-line. All I could reach was the wheelbarrow which was all rusty. And so, what I had to give to my dad was a rusty white shirt. And he was *furious* at me."

This young child learned that her best efforts were not enough to win her father's approval. She became an emotional orphan. But how different it is with our heavenly Father! Her counsellor asked her what she thought Jesus would have done with that rusty shirt. She said she didn't know. And he explained that Jesus would have delighted in it. He is *for* us, even though we are loaded with rusty sin.

We do not have to be orphans. We do not have to live in an orphanage. Having come under law, having carried the curse of the law through his atoning work on the cross, we are redeemed from the orphanage and introduced into the full rights and freedoms of sons.

But how do we stay on board of this life of grace? First, by faith in the gospel. By beginning each new day on the platform of God's unmerited favour and unfailing love. As Richard Lovelace puts it, "by looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground of acceptance" with God (*Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Downers Grove: TYP, 1979; p.101). And second, by practising a severe honesty. We must turn the critical lens away from others and onto ourselves. We have often not owned up to the depth of our depravity, resulting in a shallow view of the cross. Only big sinners need a big Christ and a big gospel.

So, brothers and sisters, go your way rejoicing with joy. Cheer up! You are much worse than you think! Cheer up! God's grace is much greater than you think! Go your way and preach the gospel to yourselves every step. And you are going to be happy. You are going to say, "This is *something*, this grace. I think I can even hear a song in my soul!"