

HOW TO MAKE PROGRESS WHEN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE BECOMES STAGNANT

Overcoming Spiritual Plateaus

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Luke 14:26-36; Romans 6:6-11; 7:15-8:12

“Knowing this, that our old man **was crucified** with him.”

Have you heard what a learning plateau is? In some areas of study, especially in spoken languages and musical instruments, a student may make rapid progress for a time and then may come to a halt. No matter how hard he struggles, progress seems very little. This is called a learning plateau. It is a critical time, full of misery and discouragement. During this period quite a few students, owing to ignorance of this fact, put away their books, desiring never to pick them up again. What a shame! In truth, this is only a temporary stop on the highway of learning. If they would persist in their studies and use their brain to adapt themselves, sooner or later they would have another period of promising progress. The manner of adjustment may vary according to different individuals, but the principle should be the same, that is, keep trying different working methods until one that works is found. The same principle works in our spiritual life.

Our spiritual life came with our birth, though then it was dead. At that time we inherited many things from our parents, who in turn inherited from their parents, and so on to Adam. Among the things we received there is a threefold depravity: spiritual blindness, enmity against God, and the inability to do good. For these reasons, prior to salvation we could not know God, neither could we obey Him, nor were we able to fulfill His moral requirement. But at the time of our regeneration, God's grant to us was also threefold: spiritual understanding, willingness to obey God, and power to do things right before God. This threefold grant can serve as a test for any Christian. If you are a Christian, you certainly know God, you are willing to obey Him and are able to do good. Otherwise, you are not a Christian—no matter who you are nor how long you have been in the Church!

After possessing this threefold grant, we know God and spiritual things. We enjoy the great happiness of sins forgiven and the wonderful experience of spiritual enlightenment. We love to read the Bible and to pray and are interested in fellowshiping with God and with fellow Christians. We often say that it is good to be a Christian! But such bright sunshine may not last very long. Sooner or later we may find that we are again under an umbrella. Our spiritual insight becomes dim. Our love toward our Lord and toward fellow Christians grows cold. Our evil intentions or habits return. Therefore, a conflict starts within us. One part of us wants to please God, and another wants us to satisfy ourselves. One longs for God's glory, and the other looks for worldly pleasure. One favors Christ, and the other prefers the World. (This is because one is from Christ and the other is from Adam.) We are caught between the gravitational pull of sin and death drawing us toward the world and the counter law of new life in Christ Jesus simultaneously pulling us Christward. During such a conflict Satan may tempt us and make us doubt whether we are really saved. We may even feel that our wife is not as sweet as she was before, or that our husband is not so darling as he was months ago.

Beloved, this is a **spiritual plateau!** It is a critical time, full of misery and discouragement. Many Christians give up their struggle and allow themselves to drift along on the spiritual highway. How sad!

They believe in Jesus who died for their sin but not in the Christ who was crucified with them. They enjoy the blessings of forgiveness but do not take Christ as the center of their life. Their moral standard is taken from their own logical ideas with which they have been acquainted since childhood. Whatever they consider to be good is good, and whatever to be bad is bad. They live by the vague notions from their subconsciousness or by the stimulation of circumstances, and not by the guidance of God's Word and the Holy Spirit. They like flattery; enjoy the desire of their flesh; fasten their eyes on money; have pride in their wealth, success, intelligence, or even a skill. In short, all Christians have their sins forgiven, but not too many have acknowledged that their old man was crucified. This is why there are so many worldly troubles within the heavenly body today! The only remedy for such an evil situation is for believers to be aware of the fact that Christ not only died for their sins but that He was also crucified with their old sin nature, in order that they be able to appropriate the truth of having been crucified with Christ and to hold to that fact moment by moment. Otherwise, their stubborn old man will stick to them forever, and there will never be real peace and happiness in either Church or home!

Now what is our sinful nature or old man? Old man, according to its usage in English, may mean father, teacher, friend, owner, captain of a ship, or a commander in the army. A year ago I learned that a wife might also call her husband "old man". But none of these is OUR OLD MAN.

Then what is our old man? Six-year-old Shirley had a bad habit of splashing in the puddle. One day her mother told her that she would punish her if she did the same thing again. Returning home in the late afternoon, Shirley's shoes were wet and her dress was splashed with mud. "Shirley," said her mother, "do you remember that I said, 'if you play in the muddy water again, I would punish you'?" "Yes, Mother," answered Shirley, "I remember." "Then why did you do it?" asked her mother. Shirley replied, "It was this way, Mother. While I was standing by the puddle thinking about it, my good man pulled me on one leg, and my bad man pulled on the other, and the bad man pulled harder!" Shirley's bad man is the same as our old man.

It is the wicked "I". "I" is incomprehensible to many Christians though it is very popular. We may be aware of compromising with the world, the insidiousness of evil, and even the devices of Satan, but not the wicked "I"! Many a time when I have accomplished something good, I would blow a trumpet before others. When the opportunity to show off comes, I would try my best to get into the line; and if I miss it, I sink! I do not want anyone else to be as educated or as popular as I am. I do not like to share the friends of "I." If someone else is chosen for a position in Church or at school instead of "I," I resent that. If someone else is better than "I," I envy. Share my sinful doings, you are my dear brother; correct my errors, you are a snake in the grass. In short, the center of life is nothing but "I," which expresses itself in self-excuse, self-pity, self-indulgence, self-superiority, and the like. The Bible precisely indicates that "I" has been condemned by God, but we pay no attention to this. Often we do not even know it! No

wonder Jeremiah says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it!” Luther also said, “I am more afraid of my own heart than of the Pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great Pope self!”

It is the corrupt flesh. Flesh here does not refer to the atoms of our body, of which many are renewed every year. It is the sinful and perverted nature which we received from Adam. It hates what God loves and loves what God hates. Within it there is nothing good. Many Christians today make a terrible mistake. They say that even in the flesh there are some good things: That is a lie! Paul was well-educated, highly cultured, and deeply trained in religion. Morally speaking, he was blameless. Yet he said that in his flesh dwelt no good thing. Why? It is because he knew that flesh as a whole is enmity against God, and no part of it can please Him. No matter how many souls are saved or how many sick people healed through our ministries. No matter how big a Church we have built or how influential a movement we are leading. If they are initiated from the flesh, God may bless the work for His own name’s sake, but we, as ministers, shall suffer loss! (Matt. 7:22, 23). Therefore, let us remember: our old man is like the Canaanites who were doomed to be **totally destroyed**. Whoever saves and exploits the flesh will be in trouble!

Now let us discuss how to be crucified with Christ. In theory, to let our old sinful nature be crucified is very simple. It is just believing the truth of our having been crucified with Christ and appropriating the fact that we have died with Him. But in reality this is not so simple. It needs further recognition and enlightenment. We confessed our sins and forsook them at the time of our regeneration because we **recognized** the wicked nature of our sins; now we need to **recognize** the wicked nature of our old man that we may condemn and forsake it. The difficulty in understanding this truth is not because we lack enough religious education, nor because we have not been long enough in Church, but something else. This is not a kind of knowledge that we can obtain with our intellect nor a decision which can be made by our will, but by a **further spiritual enlightenment** which only the Holy Spirit can make real to us. How He does this may be as follows:

During the conflict between our new nature and our old nature, because of the misery and perplexity, the Holy Spirit, on the one hand, sustains us with God’s grace and love to encourage us to resist Satan’s accusations and to abide in God’s promises. On the other, He lets us strive against our old nature by making efforts in our own strength for the victory, that we may be able to know the real nature of our old man. Again and again we may rededicate ourselves, revise our resolutions, make new decisions, and even lay down many strict rules in order to subdue the flesh. (Some Christians take these self-disciplines as evidence of their being dead with Christ; what a self-deception!) All these self-disciplines may be good for a short period, but sooner or later they all will become useless, because the power of **self-subjection will never produce spiritual union** with the dead and risen **Christ**. This is not the way to subdue the flesh, even the Holy Spirit does not strive with it (Gen. 6:3)!

After we have gone through a series of bitter struggles, and have experienced that all our efforts are not only in vain but bring us even more failure, we may realize that

whatever is within us is totally useless. We may cry out, saying, “Lord, I am dead!” In such manner, the **Holy Spirit compels us** to the very center of despair, even the PLACE OF DEATH, where we realize that in us dwells no good thing; where we are aware that we have taken the wrong working method and cry out for the right one, which is the total deliverance from above.

It is at this point that the Holy Spirit will enable us to recognize the truth of Romans 6:6: “that our old man **was crucified** (aorist tense - an event already realized) with Him.” It is not going to be crucified. Neither can I crucify it. But it was crucified with Christ. When Christ was on the cross, our perverted sin nature inherited from Adam was also nailed there and was dead 1900 years ago. We may therefore say to our old man, “You are good for nothing. You are cursed. You were nailed to the cross with Christ, and **you are dead** by my reckoning and by my faith!” Then the Holy Spirit may enable us to plunge ourselves into the death of Christ and make Christ and us one, as Lightfoot said, “I have no longer a separate existence, I am merged in Christ.” Thus, the great plateau is over, the stubborn SELF is judicially crucified with Christ, and another promising progress is ahead. Henceforth, “It is no longer I that live but Christ lives in me.”

Therefore, all that the believer needs to live the life that God desires for him is obtainable in Jesus Christ (“seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness,” 2 Pet. 1:3). Initially this particular divine provision of being crucified with Christ is a gift bestowed on us by God’s unmerited grace and understood because the Holy Spirit illumines us. Our part is to cooperate with God by “applying all diligence” (2 Pet. 1:5) to acknowledge God’s truth and to put into practice His Word to us by following the Holy Spirit’s leading. As the Scriptures say, “Live at the Spirit’s direction and you will not carry out the lusts of your flesh” (Gal. 5:16, retranslated).

Press me! My Father,
Till it is indeed “Not I”,
A broken empty vessel,
Oh use me, is my cry.

For help on living the Christian life, see *How the Holy Spirit Works in Believers’ Lives Today* and *The Kingdom and What It Means to the Life of the Believer* at this web site (www.bsmi.org).

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