

The Cross and the Holy Spirit

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee's sermon emphasizes the necessity of understanding the cross and the role of the Holy Spirit in achieving victory over sin in the believer's life.

Scripture: John 1:12, Acts 7:59, Acts 9:14, 1 Peter 1:17, 1 John 3:1

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Fear Of God"

Description

The sermon focuses on the significance of calling upon God, as seen in the Greek word 'epikaleomai,' which means to call upon or invoke deity for aid or support. This concept is highlighted in various instances in the Bible, such as Stephen calling upon the Lord in his final moments and believers being described as those who 'call upon Thy Name.' The sermon emphasizes the dual nature of God as both a loving Father and an impartial Judge, urging believers to live in reverential fear and obedience, knowing that God will judge each person's actions. The ultimate goal is for believers to practice their position as children of God, walking in holiness and acknowledging God as their Father.

Transcript

MANY, IF NOT MOST, believers were not filled with the Holy Spirit at the moment they believed the Lord. What is even worse, after many years of believing they continue to be entangled by sin and remain carnal Christians. In these pages which follow, what we intend to explain regarding how a Christian may be set free from his flesh is based upon the experience of the believers at Corinth as well as that of many like believers everywhere. We moreover do not wish to imply that a Christian must first believe in the substitutionary work of the cross before he can believe in its identifying work. Is it not true, however, that many do not have a distinct revelation concerning the cross at the beginning? What they have received is but half the whole truth; and so they are compelled to receive the other half at a subsequent period. Now if the reader already has accepted the complete work of the cross, what is given here will concern him little. But if like the majority of believers be, too has believed only half the whole then the remainder is indispensable for him. Yet we do want our readers to know that the two sides of the work of the cross need not be accepted separately; a second believing only becomes necessary because of incompleteness at the first.

THE DELIVERANCE OF THE CROSS

Upon reciting many deeds of the flesh in his Galatian letter, the Apostle Paul then points out that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and

desires" (Gal. 5.24). Here is deliverance. Is it not strange that what concerns the believer vastly differs from what concerns God? The former is concerned with "the works of the flesh" (Gal. 5.19), that is, with the varying sins of the flesh. He is occupied with today's anger, tomorrow's jealousy, or the day after tomorrow's strife. The believer mourns over a particular sin and longs for victory over it. Yet all these sins are but fruits from the same tree. While plucking one fruit (actually one cannot pick off any), out crops another. One after another they grow, giving him no chance for victory. On the other hand God is concerned not with the works of the flesh but with "the flesh" itself (Gal. 5.24). Had the tree been put to death, would there be any need to fear lest it bear fruit? The believer busily makes plans to handle sins-which are the fruits, while forgetting to deal with the flesh itself-which is the root. No wonder that before he can clear up one sin, another has burst forth. We must therefore deal today with the source of sin.

Babes in Christ need to appropriate the deeper meaning of the cross, for they are still carnal. The aim of God is to crucify the believer's old man with Christ with the result that they who belong to Christ "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Bear in mind that it is the flesh together with its powerful passions and desires that has been crucified. As the sinner was regenerated and redeemed from his sins through the cross, so now the carnal babe in Christ must be delivered from the rule of the flesh by the same cross so that he can walk according to the Spirit and no longer according to the flesh. Thereafter it will not be long before he becomes a spiritual Christian.

Here we find the contrast between the fall of man and the operation of the cross. The salvation provided by the latter is just the remedy for the former. How fitting indeed they are to each other. Firstly, Christ died on the cross for the sinner to remit his sin. A holy God could now righteously forgive him. But secondly, the sinner as well died on the cross with Christ so that he might not be controlled any longer by his flesh.

Only this can enable man's spirit to regain its proper rule, make the body its outward servant and the soul its intermediary. In this way the spirit, the soul, and the body are restored to their original position before the fall. If we are ignorant of the meaning of the death herein described we shall not be delivered. May the Holy Spirit be our Revealer.

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus" refers to every believer in the Lord. All who have believed Him and are born anew belong to Him. The deciding factor is whether one has been related to Christ in life, not how spiritual one is or what work he does for the Lord nor whether he has been freed from sin, has overcome the passions and desires of his flesh, and is now wholly sanctified. In other words, the question can only be: has one been regenerated or not? Has one believed in the Lord Jesus as his Savior or not? If he has, no matter what his current spiritual state may be-in victory or in defeat-he "has crucified the flesh."

The issue before us is not a moral one, nor is it a matter of spiritual life, knowledge, or work. It simply is whether he is the Lord's. If so, then he already has crucified the flesh on the cross. The meaning clearly is not that of going to crucify, or of in the process of crucifying, but has crucified.

It may be helpful to be more explicit here. We have indicated that the crucifixion of the flesh is not dependent upon experiences, however different they may be; rather is it contingent upon the fact of God's finished work. "Those who belong to Christ Jesus"-the weak as well as the strong-"have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." You say you still sin, but God says you have been crucified on the cross. You say your temper persists, but God's answer is that you have been crucified. You say your lusts remain very potent, but again God replies that your flesh has been crucified on the cross. For the moment will you

please not look at your experience, but just hearken to what God says to you. If you do not listen to His Word and instead look daily upon your situation, you will never enter into the reality of your flesh having been crucified on the cross. Disregard your feelings

and experience. God pronounces your flesh crucified; it therefore has been crucified. Simply respond to God's Word and you shall have experience. When God tells you that "your flesh has been crucified" you should answer with "Amen, indeed my flesh has been crucified." In thus acting upon His Word you shall see your flesh is dead indeed.

The believers at Corinth had indulged in sins of fornication, jealousies, contentions, party spirit, lawsuits and many others. They were plainly carnal. True, they were "babes in Christ"; nevertheless they were of Christ. Can it actually be said that these carnal believers had had their flesh crucified on the cross? The answer undeniably is yes; even these had had their flesh crucified. How is this so? We should realize that the Bible never tells us to have ourselves crucified; it informs us only that we "were crucified." We should understand that we are not to be crucified individually but that we have been crucified together with Christ (Gal. 2.20; Rom. 6.6). If it is a crucifixion together then the occasion when the Lord Jesus was Himself crucified is that moment when our flesh too was crucified. Furthermore, the co-crucifixion is not inflicted on us personally since it was the Lord Jesus who took us to the cross at His crucifixion. Wherefore God considers our flesh as crucified already. To Him it is an accomplished fact. Whatever may be our personal experiences God declares that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh." In order to possess such death we must not give too large a place to discovering how or to noticing our experience; we should instead believe God's Word. "God says my flesh has been crucified so I believe it is crucified. I acknowledge that what God says is true." By responding in this fashion we shall soon encounter the reality of it. If we look at God's fact first our experience will follow next.

From God's perspective these Corinthians did have their flesh crucified on the cross with the Lord Jesus; but from their point of view they certainly did not have such an experience personally. Perhaps this was due to their not knowing God's fact. Hence the first step towards deliverance is

to treat the flesh according to God's viewpoint. And what is that? It is not in trying to crucify the flesh but in acknowledging that it has been crucified, not in walking according to our sight but according to our faith in the Word of God. If we are well established on this point of acknowledging the flesh as already crucified, then we shall be able to proceed in dealing with the flesh experimentally. If we waver over this fact, the possibility of our definitely possessing it will escape us. In order to experience co-crucifixion we first must set aside our current situation and simply trust the Word of God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND EXPERIENCE

"While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions ... were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now

we are dead (Rom. 7.5-6). Because of this the flesh

has no rule over us any further.

We have believed and acknowledged that our flesh has been crucified on the cross. Now-not before-we can turn our attention to the matter of experience. Though we presently stress experience, we nevertheless firmly hold to the fact of our crucifixion with Christ. What God has done for us and what we

experience of God's completed work, though distinguishable, are inseparable.

God has done what He could do. The question next is, what attitude do we assume towards His finished work? Not just in name but in actuality has He crucified our flesh on the cross. If we believe and if we exercise our will to choose what God has accomplished for us, it will become our life experience. We are not asked to do anything because God has done it all. We are not required to crucify our flesh for God has crucified it on the cross. Do you believe this is true? Do you desire to possess it in your life? If we believe and if we desire then we shall cooperate with the Holy Spirit in obtaining rich experience. Colossians 3.5 implores us to

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you." This is the path towards experience. The "therefore" indicates the consequence of what precedes it in verse 3; namely, "You have died." The " You. have died" is what God has achieved for you

us. Because "you have died," therefore "put to death what is earthly in you." The first mention of death here is our factual position in Christ; the second, our actual experience. The failure of believers today can be traced to a failure to see the relationship between these two deaths. Some have attempted to put their flesh to nought for they lay stress only upon the death experience. Their flesh consequently grows livelier with each dealing! Others have acknowledged the truth that their flesh in fact was crucified with Christ on the cross; yet they do not seek the practical reality of it. Neither of these can ever appropriate experimentally the crucifixion of the flesh.

If we desire to put our members to death we first must have a ground for such action; otherwise we merely rely upon our strength. No degree of zeal can ever bring the desired experience to us. Moreover, if we only know our flesh has been crucified with Christ but are not exercised to have His accomplished work carried out in us, our knowledge too will be unavailing. A putting to nought requires a knowing first of an identification in His death; knowing our identification, we must exercise the putting to death. These two must go together. We are deceiving ourselves should we be satisfied with just perceiving the fact of identification, thinking we are now spiritual because the flesh has been destroyed; on the other hand, it is an equal deception if in putting to nought the wicked deeds of the flesh we over-emphasize them and fail to take a death attitude towards the flesh. Should we forget that the flesh is dead we shall never be able to lay anything to rest. The "put to death" is contingent upon the "you have died." This putting to death means bringing the death of the Lord Jesus to bear upon all the deeds of the flesh. The crucifixion of the Lord is a most authoritative one for it puts away everything it encounters. Since we are united with Him in His crucifixion we can apply His death to any member which is tempted to lust and immediately put it to nought.

Our union with Christ in His death signifies that it is an accomplished fact in our spirits. What a believer must do now is to bring this sure death out of his spirit and apply it to his members each time his wicked lusts may be aroused. Such spiritual death is not a once for all proposition. Whenever the believer is not watchful or loses his faith, the flesh will certainly go on a rampage. If he desires to be conformed completely to the Lord's death, he must unceasingly put to nought the deeds of his members so that what is real in the spirit may be executed in the body.

But whence comes the power to so apply the crucifixion of the Lord to our members? It is "by the Spirit," insists Paul, that "you put to death the deeds of the body" (Rom. 8.13), To put away these deeds the believer must rely upon the Holy Spirit to translate his cocrucifixion with Christ into personal experience.

He must believe that the Holy Spirit will administer the death of the cross on whatever needs to die. In view of the fact that the believer's flesh was crucified with Christ on the cross, he does not need today to be crucified once again. All which is required is to apply, by the Holy Spirit, the accomplished death of the Lord Jesus for him on the cross to any particular wicked deed of the body which now tries to rise up. It will then be put aside by the power of the Lord's death. The wicked works of the flesh may spring up at any time and at any place; accordingly, unless the child of God by the Holy Spirit continually turns to account that power of the holy death of our Lord Jesus, he will not be able to triumph. But if in this way he lays the deeds of the body to rest, the Holy Spirit Who indwells him will ultimately realize God's purpose of putting the body of sin out of a job (Rom. 6.6). By thus appropriating the cross the babe in Christ will be liberated from the power of the flesh and will be united with the Lord Jesus in resurrection life.

Henceforth the Christian should "walk by the Spirit" and should "not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5.16). We always should remember that however deeply our Lord's cross may penetrate into our lives we cannot expect to avoid further agitations of the wicked deeds of our members without constant vigilance. Whenever one of God's own fails to follow the Holy Spirit he immediately reverts to following

the flesh. God unveils to us the reality of our flesh through His Apostle Paul's delineation of the Christian's self in Romans 7 from verse 5 onward. The moment the Christian ceases to heed the Holy Spirit he instantly fits into the carnal life pattern described here. Some assume that because Romans 7 stands between Chapters 6 and 8 the activity of the flesh will become past history as soon as the believer has passed through it and entered into the life of the Spirit in Romans 8. In actuality Chapters 7 and 8 run concurrently. Whenever a believer does not walk by the Spirit as in Romans 8 he is immediately engulfed in the experience of Romans 7. "So then I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin" (7.25). You will notice that Paul concludes his description of his experience given before this verse 25 by using the phrase "so then." He encounters incessant defeat up through verse 24; only in verse 25 does he enter into victory: "Thanks be unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (v.25a). Upon gaining victory over constant defeat we read Paul saying: "I of myself serve the law of God with my mind." Here he is telling us that his new life desires what God desires. That, however, is not the whole story; for Paul immediately continues by declaring: "-but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." And this we find him saying just after his victory of verse 25a. The obvious inference is that no matter how much his inner mind may serve God's law, his flesh always serves sin's law. However much he may be delivered from the flesh it remains unchanged and continues to serve sin's law (v.25), because the flesh is forever the flesh. Our life in the Holy Spirit may be deepened, but this will not alter the nature of the flesh or prevent it from serving the law of sin. If we therefore desire to be led of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8.14) and freed from the oppression of the flesh, we must put to death the wicked deeds of the body and walk according to the Holy Spirit.

THE EXISTENCE OF THE FLESH

Let us note carefully that though the flesh may be so put to death that it becomes "ineffective" (the real meaning of "destroy" in Rom. 6.6), it endures nonetheless. It is a great error to consider the flesh eradicated from us and to conclude that the nature of sin is completely annihilated. Such false teaching leads people astray. Regenerated life does not alter the flesh; co-crucifixion does not extinguish the flesh; the indwelling Holy Spirit does not render it impossible to walk by the flesh. The flesh with its fleshly nature abides perpetually in the believer. Whenever opportunity is provided for its operation, it at once will spring into action.

We have previously seen how closely associated are the human body and the flesh. Until such time as we are freed physically from this body we shall not be able to be so delivered from the flesh that no more possibility of its activity exists. Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. There is absolutely no eradication of it until this body corrupted from Adam is transformed. Our body is not yet redeemed (Rom. 8.23); it waits for redemption at the return of the Lord Jesus (I Cor. 15.22, 23, 42-44, 51-56; 1 Thess. 4.14-18; Phil. 3.20-21). As long as we are in the body, therefore, we must be alert daily lest the flesh break forth with its wicked deeds.

Our life on earth can at best be likened to that of Paul, who remarked that "though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 10.3 ASV). Since he still possesses a body he walks in the flesh. Yet because the nature of the flesh is so corrupt he does not war according to the flesh. He walks in the flesh, yes; but he does not walk by the flesh (Rom. 8.4). Until a believer is set free from the physical body he is not entirely free from the flesh. Physically speaking he must live in the flesh (Gal. 2.20); spiritually speaking he need not and must not war according to the flesh. Now if by obvious inference from 2 Cor. 10.3, Paul, being in the body, remains susceptible to warring according to the flesh (though from v.4 we see he does not war that way), who then dares to say that he no longer has any potentially active flesh. The finished work of the cross and its continual application by the Holy Spirit are consequently inseparable.

We must pay unusual attention to this point for it brings in grave consequences. Should a believer come to assume that he is sanctified completely and has no more flesh, he will slip either into a life of pretension or into a life of indolence void of watchfulness. One fact needs to be underscored here. Children born of regenerated and sanctified parents are still of the flesh and in need of being born anew just as any other children are. None can say they are not of the flesh and have no need to be born anew. The Lord Jesus asserted that "that which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3.6). If what is born is flesh, it proves that what gives birth to it must likewise be flesh for only flesh can beget flesh. That children are fleshly bears concrete testimony that the parents are not delivered completely from the flesh. The saints transmit to their children their fallen nature only because it is theirs originally. They cannot impart the divine nature received at regeneration because that nature is not originally theirs but is received individually as a free gift from God. The fact that believers do communicate their sinful nature to their children indicates it is ever present in them.

Viewed from this approach, a new creature in Christ we realize never fully recovers in this life the position Adam had before the fall, for the body at least is still awaiting redemption (Rom. 8.23). A person who is a new creation continues to harbor the sinful nature within him; he is yet in the flesh. His feelings and desires are at times imperfect and they are less noble than those of Adam before the fall. Unless the human flesh is eradicated from within, he cannot have perfect feelings, desires or love. Man can never arrive at the position of being beyond the possibility of sin since the flesh persists. If a believer does not follow the Holy Spirit but instead yields to the flesh, he certainly will be under the reins of the flesh. Despite these realities, however, we should not emasculate the salvation fulfilled by Christ. The Bible informs us in many places that whatsoever has been begotten of God and is filled with God has no tendency towards sin. This though does not mean there is categorically no possibility of sinful desire. To illustrate. We say wood floats-that it does not have the tendency to sink; but surely it is not unsinkable. If the wood is soaked sufficiently enough in water it will sink of its own accord. Nevertheless the nature of a piece of wood clearly is not to sink. Similarly, God has saved us to the extent of not having the tendency to sin, but He has not saved us to the extent of our being unable to sin. Should a believer remain wholly bent toward sin, it

proves he is of the flesh and has not yet appropriated full salvation. The Lord Jesus is able to bend us away from sin; but in addition we must be watchful. Under the influence of the world and the temptation of Satan the possibility of sinning stays with us. Naturally a believer should understand that in Christ he is a new creation. As such, the Holy Spirit indwells his spirit; and this, together with the death of Jesus actively working in his body, can equip the believer to live a holy life. Such a walk is only possible because the Holy Spirit administers the cross upon the believer's flesh in putting to death the deeds of its members. It is then no longer active. This is not to imply, however, that he has no more flesh. For a believer continues to possess a sinful flesh and is conscious of its presence and defilement. The very fact that sinful nature is transmitted to the children has established beyond doubt that what we now possess is not the natural perfection of sinless Adam.

A believer must confess that even in his holiest hours there may be moments of weakness: evil thoughts may creep into his mind unconsciously; unbecoming words may escape his mouth unknowingly; his will may find it sometimes difficult to yield to the Lord; and he secretly may even endorse the thought of self-sufficiency. These are none but the works of the flesh. Therefore let it be known to believers that the flesh is able to exercise its power again at any time. It has not been eradicated from the body. But neither does the presence of the flesh mean sanctification is impossible to a believer. It is only when we have yielded our body to the Lord (Rom 6. 13) that it is possible for us no longer to be under the dominion of the flesh but under the dominion of the Lord. If we

follow the Holy Spirit and maintain an attitude of not letting sin reign over the body (Rom. 6.12), then our feet are freed from stumbling and we experience sustained victory. Our body thus delivered becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit and is at liberty to do God's work. Now the way to preserve one's freedom from the flesh must be exactly the way this freedom is first obtained at that juncture of life and death when the believer says "yes" to God and "no" to the flesh. Far from it being an aoristic once for all event in time, the believer must maintain throughout his life an affirmative attitude towards God and a negative response towards the flesh. No believer today can arrive at the point of being beyond temptation. How necessary to watch and pray and even to fast that one may know how to walk according to the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, the believer ought to dilute neither God's purpose nor his own hope. He has the possibility of sinning, but he must not sin. The Lord Jesus has died for us and crucified our flesh with Himself on the cross; the Holy Spirit indwells us to make real to us what the Lord Jesus has accomplished. We have the absolute possibility of not being governed by the flesh. The presence of the flesh is not a call for surrender but a summons to watchfulness. The cross has crucified the flesh wholly; if we are minded to put to nought the evil works of the body in the power of the Holy Spirit we shall experience indeed the finished work of the cross. "So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live" (Rom. 8.12-13). Since God has bestowed such grace and salvation, the fault is altogether ours if we continue to follow the flesh. We are no longer debtors to it as we once were before we knew such salvation. If we now persist in living by the flesh it is because we want so to live, not because we must so live.

Many matured saints have experienced sustained victory over the flesh. Though the flesh abides, its power is reduced practically to zero. Its life with its nature and activities has been laid to rest so consistently by the cross of the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit that it is relegated to a state of existence as if not present. Due to the profound and persistent operation of the cross and the faithfulness of saints in following the Holy Spirit, the flesh, though existing, loses all its resistance. Even its power to

stimulate believers seems to be nullified. Such a complete triumph over the flesh is attainable by all believers.

"If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live." The entire relationship expressed in this verse hangs upon that word "if." God has done all that is necessary; He cannot do anything more. It is now up to us to take a stand. If we neglect this perfect salvation, how then shall we escape? "If you live according to the flesh you will die"-this is a warning. Although you are regenerated you nonetheless will lose out in your spiritual walk as though you are not alive. "If by the Spirit" you live, you also die, but you die in the death of Christ. Such a death is most authentic because that death will put to nought all the deeds of the flesh. One way or the other you will die. Which death do you choose: that which stems from lively flesh or that which issues in active spirit? If the flesh is alive the Holy Spirit cannot live actively. Which life do you prefer: that of the flesh or that of the Spirit? God's provision for you is that your flesh and its entire power and activities may be put under the power of Christ's death on the cross. What is lacking in us is none other than death. Let us emphasize it before we speak of life, for there can be no resurrection without prior death. Are we willing to obey God's will? Are we amenable to letting the cross of Christ come out practically in our lives? If so, we must by the Holy Spirit put to death all the wicked deeds of the body.

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