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RESTORE UNTO US THE JOY OF THY SALVATION

by G. Barthelm

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When this prayer of penitent King David is assigned as the topic for a conference essay it carries with it a depressing implication. The implication is that something precious has been lost, or is in the process of being lost.

In the case of King David there was an awareness that something, that he had previously cherished, was missing. It was an intangible thing, spiritual in character, that had the added quality of being able to slip away gradually. Its decline or disappearance was therefore unnoticed until it was suddenly brought to his attention by unusual circumstances.

We observe a similar situation in the congregations at Ephesus and Laodicea, which was set forth in the special letters that the Lord Jesus addressed through the Apostle John to the seven churches of Asia Minor. In the letter to Ephesus He said (Rev. 2:4): "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." To Laodicea He said (Rev. 3:15): "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

In all these instances something precious was disappearing, gradually, and unnoticed by the owners, until the Lord Himself intervened and emphatically pointed to the loss. It would appear that the Lord is graciously doing something similar to us by having an essay such as this assigned for this conference.

I. An Alerting To A Serious Loss

The alarm has been sounded! The assigned topic proclaims the loss in the framework of a solemn prayer: "Restore unto us the joy of Thy salvation." The word "restore" acknowledges the loss. If the item were still present, we would not be pleading that it be restored. The item that is lost is called "the joy of Thy salvation." Joy is intangible and invisible, but its presence and absence are noticable and evident by its results in the words and actions of the individual. The experiencing of joy cannot help expressing itself in the outward conduct; and if these genuine outward expressions and evidences are generally lacking, or even waning, a disclosure is being made about the condition of their cause or source. Is it fading, or withering, on the way to extinction?

But we are speaking here of a special kind of joy: the joy that is identified with the added phrase: the joy of Thy salvation. This is then the specific joy that arises from knowing and believing most certainly that we are saved from sin and eternal death through the merits of Christ and His redemptive work.

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In this connection we must be cautioned against attempted reading or judging the hearts of others, and must be strongly urged that each one restrict himself to a thorough examination of his own heart and inner experience. Has the degree of my joy in respect to the salvation that my Savior has won for me declined over the years? Am I thinking less frequently of the blessed benefits that are mine for this life and for all eternity because of God's grace and the Savior's love for me? Do I speak less frequently and with less excitement about them to my relatives and friends? Do I make a willing sacrifice when I plan my thankofferings to the Lord for all that He has done for me? Has my church attendance and Communion attendance degenerated into a perfunctory exercise that is expected of me with but little inner reaction in my heart and soul? Has my preaching and teaching of the Word of God and my other pastoral activities taken on the semblance of merely a means to support myself and my family? Has the insidious apathy and indifference on my part toward our undeserved eternal salvation not had a negative and cooling effect on the members of my congregation, and on my brethren in general? If my brethren are experiencing a similar loss or recession of spiritual joy as I am, what must be the cumulative effect upon the thoroughness of the work which the Lord has assigned to us as a church body? Each of us must keep his own score in this self-examination.

II. Causes of the Loss in Spiritual Joy

The causes of the loss in spiritual joy are many and of various kinds. In the case of King David the causes were pride and the lusts of the flesh. They drew him away from a sensitive consciousness of his sinful condition and of his unworthiness of any joys whatsoever before his heavenly Father. His mind and heart soon became thoroughly occupied with how he could gratify the desires of his sinful flesh even at the expense of his fellow human beings, with very little thought, if any at all, about his heavenly Father's attitude and reaction toward what he was desiring and doing.

With the congregation at Ephesus the cause for their loss of spiritual joy seems to have been a plain case of forgetfulness, for the Lord admonishes them (Rev.2:5): "Thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen." No further explanations are given as to what caused their change of attitude.

At Laodicea the cause for their loss was a failure to evaluate properly their salvation in Christ. This great gift and high honor had become commonplace and unexciting to them, because they too failed to remember what they really deserved from God on account of their many sins, and had become interested in numerous earthly and material benefits and pursuits. The result was that the Lord found

them disgustingly "lukewarm: neither cold nor hot."

All these causes, and many more, can be condensed into one main cause: Satan is determined to separate the true children of God from their heavenly Father and from the life-giving Gospel of salvation. He enlists many allies from the world and every "old Adam" that resides in the hearts and lives of the children of God. He employs either force, or apathy and indifference, or alluring temptations to attract the true believers to other glittering but deceiving enjoyments. In short, we as the true believers and children of God are to be reminded that every loss of spiritual joy that we may suffer is caused by the fact that we are still in the Church Militant. The bitter war between God and His true children, on the one side, and Satan together with all his allies on the other, rages on! The stakes are high: the immortal souls of even the elect! God in His grace is determined to preserve them to eternal life! Satan with all his guile and power is determined to snatch them away to eternal death!

Does a person have more than one Old Adam? Not intended by author.

Here lies the real and basic cause of our trouble, that prompts us to cry with King David: "Restore unto us the joy of Thy salvation." It is most wholesome that we become increasingly aware of the position that we as the true children of God occupy in this war. Indeed, we are enlisted in the ranks of God to fight against Satan and all his forces. Moreover, the Lord supplies the armor and the weapons that insure for us the victory!

At the same time we are the prize targets on which Satan has set his sights. Again and again he tries to infiltrate our ranks with false doctrine and unfaithfulness to God's Word in order to confuse us and to break up our firm stand against him. He makes use of our Old Adam in order to cause dissension, strife, envy, and even hatred toward one another in order to weaken us and to further his cause. As we discuss and debate questions of doctrine and practice at our conferences, or even informally in our visits with one another, we are at times insidiously induced to stray away from objectivity, and to become personal and subjective in our discussions, which consequently even develop into quarrels. Such incidents cannot but dampen "the joy" of our salvation in Christ. They also paralyze our zeal in being witnesses for Christ and His Gospel to others, because we have greatly expended our strength and our funds in arbitrating the differences among ourselves.

III. Plea for Restoration

As we become increasingly aware of our sad condition, we search for a remedy and a cure. To whom else shall we go but to our gracious heavenly Father? We herewith pour out our hearts before Him, we give voice to our sorrow and sadness

over what we see in our self-examination, and which He was noticing as it developed in us. We are confident that He will never forsake or reject us.

Our confidence is based on God's love for us in Christ, and not on any merit on our part, as though He would uphold us as a recompense for trying so hard as a conservative church body to keep our doctrine and practice pure.

As in the case of penitent King David, this plea to the Lord for restoration marks a turning point in our condition. Now that the Lord has graciously made us aware of the crippling spiritual disease that has been creeping over us, He has also brought us to the determination and resolution that we find and apply the only effective remedy with which to bring about the cure.

IV. The Assured Remedy

Sadness and depression must depart, and be replaced by hope, in the presence and application of the assured remedy in an otherwise hopeless situation. That remedy has been prescribed by the Lord in numerous similar situations that are reported in Holy Scripture. It can be condensed into one word, "repent." John the Baptist prescribed it, when he proclaimed (Matt.3:2): "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus repeated it, when He said (Mark 1:15): Repent ye, and believe the Gospel. Peter stated it after his famous Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:38): "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." St. John was directed to write to the church at Ephesus (Rev.2:5): "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works;" to the church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:19): "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent." The same remedy is prescribed in the letters to the other churches of Asia Minor, and in countless other incidents in Scripture.

The word "repent" is not used for a mere abstract concept. It has a rich and very interesting meaning. It implies an inner struggle and conflict of the heart, followed by a favorable outcome. The favorable outcome constitutes a victory over an opposing force. The victory becomes evident when the individual confesses, without alibi or excuse, that he has done wrong, or has been guilty of neglect and serious failure.

Although the remedy has another part, we pause to apply the first part to our present case. Is each of us experiencing genuine sorrow and confessing his sin of deterioration to a certain spiritual "lukewarmness" and a loss of our "first love" toward the Lord and His precious Word to us? Such a sincere confession is basic and essential toward a cure, although it is not the cure itself.

The second part of the concept of "repent" brings with it the cure, for this second part is implicit trust and faith in what the Lord says (Matt.9:2): "Be of good cheer: thy sins be forgiven thee." (I John 1:7): "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin." (Isaiah 43:1): "Fear thou not, for I have redeemed thee: I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine." *Also Phil. 4:4*
Ps. 100:1-2

V. Joy Over the Recovery of the Loss

When the lost sheep and the lost coin are recovered in the parables of Jesus, then there is great joy: genuine, heartfelt joy! This joy is spontaneous: it comes as a natural sequence.

So the joy that we speak of in our current topic is the renewed joy in our salvation, the plan that the Lord in His grace has devised and executed to save us unworthy sinners from eternal death, that we may enjoy heaven with Him forever. This joy includes amazement and appreciation over His complete forgiveness of our past neglect and lukewarmness toward the wondrous message of His Word.

This renewed joy in our hearts is also a product of the Holy Spirit. Paul includes it as a precious link in the chain that he presents when describing the results of the Holy Spirit's work in us (Gal.5:22): "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, etc."

This joy cannot help expressing itself in various forms. Our prayers of thanks will be more sincere and from the heart. A new zeal will drive us to a more concentrated study of God's Word and an excitement in sharing the glorious message of that Word with others. Our offerings to the Lord will be more generous and more in the nature of a real sacrifice instead of a perfunctory giving of "leftovers." Our homes and our family life will give ample evidence of our joy in the Lord and His salvation to us. Our work in the local congregation and in our synodical meetings and conferences will reflect that holy joy in the way we address our brethren, cooperate with them, and show consideration for their feelings. Differences of opinion, doctrinal discussions and debates will be carried on objectively and in an atmosphere of genuine brotherly love.

These are some of the desired fruits that are assured to us as we confidently and penitently address our Lord in sincere prayer:

"RESTORE UNTO US THE JOY OF THY SALVATION!"

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