

## **God's pursuit of man; man's pursuit of God**

Colossians 3:1-5a;

<sup>1</sup>If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things above, not on the things of the world. <sup>3</sup>For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. <sup>5</sup>Put to death therefore what is earthly in you . . .

### **The people of Sri Lanka**

The people of Sri Lanka are in peaceful protest. What do they want? They want honest government. They want people in government who will serve the people. They don't want greedy, corrupt self-serving politicians and civil servants. Greedy for money and greedy for status. The Rajapaksa dynasty, that has now, supposedly, been thrown out, although the new President was a big fan, borrowed massive amounts of money, mainly from China, for projects that offered just momentary self-glorification. Now China is looking for its money back, the people have been thrown even further into poverty, and the Rajapaksa family have been put to shame.

The people want change. But is change possible?

Could those who can see what is wrong, and who are demanding change, were they put into power, could they be the people that they believe the country needs? The image of God within them has them pursuing godly qualities, but is it within their power to bring those qualities into government? Are they already, personally, bringing godly qualities into society in their own sphere of influence? Without the Holy Spirit we cannot pursue and implement godly qualities. Eventually, all things fall back to where they were. The god of this world has blinded the minds of these unbelievers. (2 Cor.4:4)

I was once involved in conservation, especially relating to birds. One day I was directed to a young peregrine with a broken wing. It was one of the chicks I had ringed in Sulby. Eventually I got it to the Wild Life Park, but when I visited a few weeks later, I found it throwing itself against the wire of the cage with blood coming from its beak, and feathers broken. So I took it back and, through the RSPB, got it sent to a centre in England where it would be used to rear other peregrines that would be released into the wild.

These Sri Lankans, mainly Buddhist and Hindu, men and women believe that they hold the key to the cage that they are presently trapped in. But

they do not. They want good things, but they live in fear of superstition and in fear of the gods they have made with their own hands. If only they knew it. They are trapped and throwing themselves against the wires. They are in Satan's hands.

### **The people of the Isle of Man**

Now, moving away from Sri Lanka, what about us in the West? Have we joined in with all the wild birds in our society? Are we throwing ourselves hopelessly against the wires of the cage, trying to bring changes in our own strength? This is what the people expected from Jesus. They didn't want Jesus meek and mild. They expected Jesus to rally the troops to free the Jews from Roman oppression. Are we still expecting Jesus to bring about the changes that we mere humans expect?

Here in our society God's moral goodness has been redefined as evil; while society is claiming that evil is good:

- Lust is defined as love.
- The objectification of women's sexuality through pornography, is defined as female empowerment.
- Same-sex marriage is defined as honouring to God.
- Gross injustice toward factory workers in the developing world, which is driven by greed, is defined as globalism.

and worst of all . . .

- The destruction of millions of children in the womb is defined as 'reproductive justice', or as a 'woman's human right'.

(Taken from John Mark Comer's book 'Live no Lies.')

But evil can never be good, whether we believe in God or not. This is the cultural cage in which our people live. So, we Christians join with the unbelievers and argue and protest! We do just what all those non-Christians do who are also against, for example, abortion. We protest against this; we protest against that. We mimic those in the 1<sup>st</sup> century who expected Jesus to lead a civil rights movement.

It's a very ancient idea. We object to things like the legalisation of cannabis, but we don't say why we protest. Or if we do, we say we are protesting because cannabis is a mind-altering drug that causes depression and psychosis. We don't mention Christ. We try to change the world through argument, when we know that the only Person who can change the moral values of a nation is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, who changes the moral values of each person, one-by-one.

We see the world we live in and we try to be better Christians. We try to pray more. We try not to be anxious about the state of the world; family problems; our own health. We try to be kind to our neighbour?

Do we really believe we can bring in a world that is better by God's standards by joining unbelievers as they throw themselves against the wires of the cage they are trapped in?

Man's pursuit of God is deeply flawed in so many ways.

What we should be doing is standing outside, reaching into the cage, with hearts of compassion, and leading those trapped toward freedom.

Colossians 3 starts, "If then we have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above." The problem with being raised with Christ, is that we have to follow Him into the grave. Verse 3 says so, "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ, in God."

This is the problem with salvation. We have to die before we can receive.

I died on Easter Sunday, 2013. I was broken. I had turned my back on God. I had returned to my life of sin. Outwardly, I was a good man. I was doing good work in peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, but my love for the Lord had grown cold. My wife had followed other members of her family by ending her life on this earth through suicide. But she hadn't just taken her own life, she had taken a huge chunk of life from us all! I sought comfort, but none was to be found.

Not until I died to myself, and submitted wholly and completely to the Lord. I didn't try to repent. This was His gift to me. It was not of my own making; it was a gift from God. I repented because I had no option. I was broken.

Seeking the things that are above is not a matter of standing on top of North Barrule and looking into the sky. Nor is it trying to be a better Christian. "Try to . . ." is not in the Bible. It is a matter of bending the knee and getting into the mind of God. And we can only do that through the reading of the Bible. And to read it with a child-like submissive, repentant heart.

### **The Bible, a source of supernatural, transformative power.**

In Hebrews 4:12, the author (who may, or may not, have been Paul) writes, "<sup>12</sup>For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (KJV)

Matthew Henry, in his commentary on Hebrews, writes that the word of God is not a dead letter; not just a collection of books:

- It is **quick**; it is very lively and active, in all its efforts, in seizing the conscience of the sinner, in cutting him to the heart, and in comforting him and binding up the wounds of the soul.
- It is **powerful**. When God brings his Word into our mind by his Spirit, it **convinces** powerfully, **converts** powerfully, and **comforts** powerfully. It is so powerful as to sweep away Satan's kingdom in you, and to set up the kingdom of Christ permanently in its place.
- It is **sharper than any two-edged sword**; it cuts both ways; it is *the sword of the Spirit*, Eph. 6:17. It is the two-edged sword that comes directly out of the mouth of Christ, Rev. 1:16. It will enter where no other sword can.
- It is **a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart**, even the most secret and remote thoughts and designs. Where can we go to hide from the Spirit of God? (Ps.139)

On the day of my repentance the Lord brought me back into His Word. Moments before repentance I had been reading the story of Peter's denials in John's gospel. But then. In the days and weeks following, He started to gently bring me deeper into His Word. I was led to a Bible reading plan that takes me through the Bible each year – 3 OT passages and 1 NT passage every morning. That's 9 years ago.

One of my great appreciations through this reading of the whole Bible, is the richness in the writings of Paul. We can lose sight, or fail to grasp, Paul's total immersion in the OT. Paul was always a religious man, but now he was a man of God. His mind had been transformed and that learning that he had used to persecute Christians, was now being used to bless.

### **The Transformative power of repentance through Scripture.**

Paul's writings don't just stand alone. They stand within the whole of the canon of Scripture. How did this happen? Because Paul had an experience of repentance. He was distraught at having committed grave sins against God. The Holy Spirit then drew Paul aside and immersed him in Scripture for 3 years.

Then, from the genuineness of his transformed heart, knowing full well that to be cast away from the presence of God is the most terrible, eternal tragedy for anyone, he began his ministry.

God pursues us, and leads us to the Bible. We must pursue God through the Bible. **The sweetness of the fruit of our submission to God comes from the reading of God's word.** I want to emphasise that. The sweetness of the fruit of our submission to God comes from the reading of God's word.

Here is the challenge. Turn the TV off in the evening. Get to bed early so you can get up early in the morning. Get up, make a cup of tea and settle down with God's word. This is a godly habit.

But do you read your Bible, or do you read a verse or two from the Bible, then read what someone else says about the Bible? There is a plethora of books, Bible reading notes hard copy and on line. Daily Bread, Lectio 365, etc.. There are reliable commentaries, of course, but is it possible that Satan has deceived us believers by distracting us from direct communication with God toward getting it second-hand through others?

The Lord wants His people to know Him first-hand. This is sanctification. Through our reading of the Bible, we allow Him to put to death what is earthly in us. His power is then released through us. He enables us to reach inside the cage, with a heart of compassion, and help us lead the people, believers and unbelievers who are wounded and bleeding, into freedom in Christ.

“Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.” (Ecc.4:1)