

Living the New Life

I was in prison for twelve years, but it wasn't for the crime I had committed, it was for failing to recognize that the payment for my crime had been fully paid. I thought only half of my fine had been paid and I still needed to come up with the remainder to be released.

The Apostle Paul also spent time in a Roman prison before he was condemned to death. He was shackled by guards in the Mamertine prison awaiting trial. But, he used his time effectively by writing letters to young pastors and new churches he had previously established in Asia Minor. Two of his letters are among my favorites in the Bible--Romans and Philippians.

The book of Romans is a major source of doctrine for the church, a mystery not revealed fully until after the death of Christ. Paul's ministry was primarily to the Gentiles, who needed to understand how God's new body of believers, the church, was to function after the Jews had rejected His kingdom. The book of Philippians was a primer on how to live a joy-filled life. Both books contain deep doctrinal truths, but also, practical instructions on daily living. I needed to understand the teachings in both the books to resolve issues that were plaguing me, my lack of security and joy in my life.

Somehow, I didn't understand Scripture well enough to realize that when I accepted Christ as my Savior, it was a permanent, irrevocable agreement. I understood intellectually that my sins had been forgiven, but emotionally I felt the need to maintain my salvation by working hard on religious projects. I believed in the security of the believer, but somehow just couldn't quite obtain the peace and confidence that everything was kosher. I taught classes, invited people to church, sang in the choir, even served as a deacon, and spent a lot of energy doing good deeds.

But, most of this effort was in my own strength. I thought this was the way Christians were supposed to function. It was hard work and becoming harder with time. More and more, I had to psych myself up to do things for God. The Christian way of life was no longer enjoyable, but onerous. By the time I was thirty, living this way had worn me down so much that I was having major difficulties simply attending church. I had little passion for Christianity or the life I was leading. Something had to change, or I was going to have a crisis in faith. I was in prison!

Fortunately, my wife, Jeannette, and I had begun attending a new church in Ft. Collins, Colorado where I was working toward graduate degrees at Colorado State University. The pastor was M.R. Siemens, a senior pastor, well-known in the Mid-West. During the four years we were members he preached in-depth, expository sermons on the entire book of Romans. Jeannette and I also studied a lesson from the Moody Bible Correspondence School each Sunday afternoon while our kids napped. We completed about a dozen courses during the four years in Colorado.

All this heavy study began to have an effect. When I first came under Dr. Siemen's teaching, I reacted strongly. I became angry and my ears would literally burn. His preaching reminded me of some of the fire, hell, and brimstone preaching I had heard as a child. At first, I thought we had chosen the wrong church.

We had grown accustomed to preaching that was not so intellectually challenging and laid a guilt trip on the listener each Sunday for not completing a checklist of do's and don'ts. And, more significantly, the preaching we were now experiencing was done with an authority I had never heard before.

I was offended by our pastor making claims and demands as if he were God. It took me almost three months to realize the authority of his preaching didn't come from him, but from the Word he was sharing. He taught the Bible as if it was fully infallible and should be taken literally.

This recognition of the Bible as authoritative and to be taken literally, played a major part in my decision to become a young-earth creationist. See my article entitled, "How I Became a Creationist," for the complete story of that decision. But, this new appreciation for the reliability of the bible also caused me to solve two other issues I had been struggling with.

As Dr. Siemens progressed through Romans on Sunday mornings and I was introduced to premillennial, dispensational theology in the evenings, I began to recognize the enormity and thoroughness of God's plan for the Jews and His church. I was also made aware of the basis and results of my salvation, particularly the peace of God taught in Romans 5:1 "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This verse spoke to me in a way I had never understood before. Having believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead for our justification, righteousness was imputed to me, I was granted access to His grace by faith, and could rejoice in the hope of glory. Peace with God in the fullest sense was granted to me.

This meant the transaction was a "done deal." I no longer had to work to maintain my salvation. I didn't need to do the works of God, to earn "Brownie Points ", but to express my appreciation for what he had already done. My security issue had been resolved, but I still had another issue to take care of--how to be motivated to do the work of the Lord without growing weary.

About the same time, I learned how to resolve my security issue, a solution to my motivation problem was revealed through the study of Philippians 2:13, "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."

The first thing I learned from this verse was, who was "working" in me. It turns out I had a wrong concept of who God is. God the Holy Spirit is the One working in me. I had thought the Holy Spirit was just a faceless influence, not a person. Prior to that time, I had referred to the Holy Spirit as an "It". I thought of Him like Luke Skywalker referred to the "Force" in Star Wars. You know, "Let the force be with you!" But, the Holy Spirit is not an " It", He is a person. He's one of the three persons of the Trinity.

The second thing I learned was that the Holy spirit is the One who works in me to "do" His good pleasure. What a relief! It's God who does all the work through me that I had been trying to do in my own strength. But, not only that, the Holy Spirit also works in me to "will" to do His good pleasure. That's incredible! I think near the end of my "prison" experience, it had become harder for me to "want" to do things for God than it was to actually "do" them.

The result of all this revolution in my thinking, was that I suddenly began to experience a new joy in my life. I learned to allow the Holy Spirit to "Lead me" in recognizing what He needed done. I didn't have to artificially pump up enthusiasm or overextend myself or feel guilty if I didn't do everything others demanded of me. I just need to be available when the Holy Spirit calls.

This new outlook was not accompanied by tongues and ecstatic utterances as some would teach. It is a new loving, joyful, and peaceful relationship with God. After all, Galatians 5:22 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, ...". This was exactly what I experienced.

My new life began when I turned thirty, almost twelve years after I was saved. The feeling at the time was like the prison doors had been flung open and I was free!

I credit the Lord for revealing these truths to me through the diligent teaching of a faithful pastor. Because the content of Philippians 2:13 was so pivotal in my walk with the Lord, I adopted it as my "Life Verse" almost fifty years ago and can use it on a moment's notice to encourage believers who are struggling in their pilgrimage. If you aren't enjoying your Christian walk, let Romans and Philippians fix it.