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Life In Christ

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Over the past several years, I've had many opportunities to write about my Christian journey—it started with my first application to the Eastern Valley Baptist Association for a License, its renewal last month, my application to the Board of Ministerial Standards and Education within the CBAC for my entrance interview last year, and now as I prepare my exit interview application for submission in the new year.

Through it all, I've found a deep sense of healing in taking time to reflect on how faithfully God has been with me and my family—guiding, shaping, and sustaining us every step of the way, that despite my flaws and failures, God still loves me. It's made me stop and think of many different times in my life. Such as when my anxiety was running high when I was hiding postpartum depression. Our marriage taking a huge hit (thank the Lord for marriage counselling and our commitment to each other and God). I had stopped going to church shortly after the birth of our daughter, I didn't know if I wanted to continue my teaching

profession. I was questioning everything in my life. Then I started here at Billtown Baptist Church. I was passed by on a promotion at work that everyone thought I would get and told that unless I moved from my current teaching position I would never move up in the teaching world. I switched schools only to have things get worse. It was during those times that I was thankful to have a Christian mentor who walked alongside me who kept pointing me to Christ. We talked baptism, I started talking to people about my struggles and there started to be a calm coming out of the storm. I was baptized and riding on cloud nine. I was getting settled back into work and my anxiety/depression was lessening. Then my significant Christian support community, moved away and I felt lost. My life group no longer existed. I continued connecting with God but I also felt alone. Then began what I now recognize as my call to ministry. It started with fasting and praying, which led into fully original compositions of music based on Scripture which I would awake to the middle of the night, a time of a lot of journaling. God asking me to volunteer at VBS, supporting a student on their Christian journey, concussions, hearing God in different ways, gall bladder attacks, and hearing God ask me to go back to school to do my ministry degree. Becoming the children and youth coordinator, leaving my full-time teaching job, and now being a full time pastor. What a journey it has been. I know I'm where God wants me to be, but it hasn't always been

easy. My second funeral was that of my uncle, just a few weeks after doing my first. My father-in-law passed away, in the spring, at the very end of the semester, I nearly lost my sister and my best friend's husband this past summer (I thank God that they are both alive), and am battling increased headaches and exhaustion levels this fall. But God continues to see me through and my eyes are fixed on him. I don't share this for pity or concern (prayers are always welcomed), but to encourage you to reflect on your own faith journey from the moment you first encountered Him. You may not recall every detail, but tracing His presence through your story can be deeply comforting and a beautiful reminder of how faithfully God has walked beside you, through all the ups and downs. As you've said yes to God, the enemy tries to destroy this relationship.

As we've walked on our journey this fall of our relationship with Jesus today we've reached the point to discuss, what happens when conflict begins to happen, as it most certainly will.

As John Bartol writes, "During the first few weeks or months of your Christian life you may feel that you will never again experience spiritual dryness or defeat. Yet it may not be long before doubts, temptations, and even evil thoughts come to you. Do not be dismayed or discouraged because every Christian will experience this conflict in one form or another. It reminds us of some very important

truths.”

So, what are these truths?

1. There is victory over the old nature. From birth we are prone to sin and failure, but at our new birth through Christ we received a spiritual nature through God’s Holy Spirit. These two natures battle each other. As it says in parts of Galatians 5:16–26 “Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.” A new Christian put it this way, “I feel as if there are two dogs inside of me, one good and the other bent on wrong doing, and they are always fighting. The dog I feed the most is the one that wins!” Accepting Christ into your heart gives you victory over the stubborn self nature under Christ’s control
2. The second truth is victory through daily discipline of time, thoughts, tongue, etc. Discipline and disciple come from the same root. Your day needs to have time for prayer, study of the Bible, work, fellowship with other

Christians, rest, exercise. The mind and the body are channels for the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.”

3. The third truth is that there is victory over temptation. As you continue saying “yes” to God, you may notice that temptation feels even stronger or more present. Yet that awareness is part of spiritual growth—it means you’re no longer drifting with the current but resisting it. As one author beautifully said, “You never know the strength of the current or tide until you swim against it.” It reminds me of the opening scene from *The Chosen (plug in for the Bible Study here on Tuesday nights!)*, where a single blue fish swims against the flow of the grey ones, which then turns to more blue fish swimming against the flow—a powerful image of what it looks like to follow Christ in a world moving the other way. While God does not tempt us, he will allow temptations and testings as a way to grow stronger in our faith as we’re reminded in James 1:2–4. Temptation is not sin, yielding to it is.

There are several times in Scripture when satan appears to interact or there is at least satanic influence with the disciples.

Let’s focus on a couple opportunities which feature Peter.

Matthew 16:13–23, labeled as Peter’s declaration about Jesus “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”” What a quick turn around, from declaring that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, which Jesus replies, blessed are you for

flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven, to Jesus then saying to Peter, Get behind me, Satan!

Then in Luke 22 the disciples are debating over greatness. Jesus then responds in Luke 22:31–32 ““Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”” Jesus is speaking to all the disciples, that Satan actively seeks the destruction of all who follow Jesus. Peter may not necessarily know what Jesus is saying at this particular time, but he comes to understand this later on in his life as written in 1 Peter 5:8 “Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.” Similar to Jesus’ words, which also relates to Job 1:7 “The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the Lord, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.”” Satan is roaming around trying to find those followers of Christ he can turn away.

Similarly to Peter, Judas is also labelled Satan but actually interacts with him willingly, as his pawn. In the end he learns, like Adam and Eve, that nothing good can be gained from participating with Satan.

In John 6, Jesus declares himself the bread of life. At the end of this discussion Jesus says, John 6:63–70 “It is the

spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.””

Jesus had known from the beginning that Judas was not all that he seemed to be, and states that “one of you [Judas] is the devil.” Judas is influenced early on from Satan, as we hear in John 13:2 “The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him” This influence gets stronger over time, eventually instead of just being identified with Satan almost becoming a personification of Satan. It says in John 13:27 “After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, “Do quickly what you are going to do.”” Judas betrays Jesus through the making of a covenant with the chief priests to hand him over, making a deal with the devil

himself. Where a covenant with Satan is made there can be only death.

The part we read in John 13 this morning is after a meal and foot washing, Jesus announces the betrayal of Judas and Peter's denial of knowing Christ. Think about it, Judas and Peter were both chosen to be among the 12 disciples, who remained followers of Jesus throughout his 3 years of public ministry. They each had their own role. Peter was often the spokesperson for the group, and Judas oversaw the money. They both had times when they would undermine Jesus' redemptive mission, however not in similar ways and not for the same reasons. Peter was spontaneous, Judas was more calculated. Despite how similar their paths could have gone, Peter's denials of Jesus three times, led to his repentance of his sins, he was restored. Judas' betrayal led to despair, remorse, and suicide. It reminded me of the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. That when a farmer scatters seeds on different types of ground, some seeds fall on the path, and birds eat them, some fall on rocky ground, where they sprout quickly but wither because they have no roots. Others fall among thorns, which grow up and choke them, and finally, some fall on good soil, where they grow and produce a great harvest.

Jesus explains that the seed represents God's Word, and the different soils represent the conditions of people's

hearts. The message is that the Word only bears lasting fruit in those who hear it, understand it, and allow it to take deep root in their lives. Judas, while hearing it, did not allow it to take room. He let despair and remorse sink so far in, not recognizing that he could still have victory in Christ, no one is too far gone for Christ if you let him abide in you.

I read the passage in Matthew 26 the other night when Peter denied Jesus three times and the rooster crowed, I was really struck by the words at the end of verse 75, “Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.” He wept bitterly. Peter, hearing the same teachings from Jesus that Judas had heard, not always being successful and needing lots of pruning, but bore much fruit, finding the key to a life in a living relationship with Christ. Peter wept bitterly, he had a godly grief, while Judas had a wordly grief.

We are never going to be perfect, we are always going to fail. We are made in His image, we have made irresponsible decisions in our life, but as we repent, God forgives us, and we need to accept that forgiveness, we’re not perfect, only Christ was, but God approves of us, that’s what makes the cross so significant. Christ paid the penalty for the sins in our lives. He offers us a gift for something we don’t deserve. We need to trust in him, accept this gift, and desire to obey Him. We’re not good enough, but Christ is.

Once you accept Christ into your life the enemy loves to kill and destroy. Yet, you're still going to be good enough to go to heaven. This is the good news. As Paul writes in Romans 7:19–25 “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

How you respond to life's challenges can be more important than the circumstances themselves, because there will be challenges, Satan is always just around the corner. Peter's response, repent and receive God's forgiveness. Judas' response, wallow in self-pity, plunging to eternal destruction. Two Men, One Cross, and now an eternity between them. We all will have life's challenges. Reach out to Christ and those he has placed in your life for support. You were never meant to do this alone.