

THE SUBTLE REBIRTH OF THE “OLD MAN”

By Paul Penno Jr.

April 21, 2010

Unless Christ died for nothing, His followers will shine in this dark world like stars on a black, stormy night. They will be free from the curse of selfishness.

But as we look both about us and in us, we see that often when sin is overcome on lower levels, it subtly reappears on higher levels. Selfishness crops out anew, disguised and refined but nonetheless evil. The pathetic pretensions of “saints” who have forgotten that they are sinners have been the scandal and reproach of much that the world sees as “Christianity.” Is it hard to imagine the shame that Christ must often feel?

In Jesus’ clear teaching about the cross we find the solution to this problem: “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross *daily*, and follow Me.’” Luke 9:23. The reason for Jesus’ command to take up our cross *daily* is the fact that the “old man” who was crucified yesterday reappears in a new form today. His true identity is never fully apprehended by the sincere believer.

What we sense as “self” today may be correct, and our experience of renouncing and crucifying self today may be genuine. But each succeeding victory is that of a battle and not the war itself. The “old man” reappears in a higher, more cleverly disguised form daily. Hence the need, as Jesus says, for bearing the cross daily.

CAN WE EVER GET BEYOND BEARING THE CROSS?

If we say Yes, we make ourselves better than Jesus was, because He *had* to fight the battle daily throughout His life. “I do not seek My own will,” He said of His daily conflict, “but the will of the Father who sent Me.” John 5:30. Jesus would not ask us to follow Him in taking up our cross daily unless He also took up His cross daily. “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.” Matthew 10:24.

Not only will the cross be carried here in this life daily, but even in heaven’s eternity the principle of self-renunciation symbolized by the cross will motivate the behavior of the redeemed, while the cross of Christ will remain their study. The book of Revelation presents to us that after sin is no more, Christ will still bear His title as the Crucified One—the “Lamb.” The temple in the New Jerusalem is the Lamb; and proceeding from the throne of the Lamb is the river of water of life. The throne of God is the throne of the Lamb. Revelation 21:22; 22:1, 3. The love so amply demonstrated on the cross will ever be recognized as the basis of God’s government, and will flow out to all the universe in unending streams of light and life and gladness.

Only as the selfless love of Christ on the cross reigns in every heart will it be certain that sin can never appear again. Should the love of self ever arise in any heart in the universe, the very essence of sin would be back again, and the whole sad war

in the universe would have to be repeated. Thank God, that will not happen! “Affliction will not rise up a second time.” Nahum 1:9. And in bearing our cross daily now, we are beginning to live out that principle of eternal life. In fact, eternal life begins now.

THERE ARE NEW FORMS THE “OLD MAN” ASSUMES

Since Jesus’ command to take up our cross daily is necessary only because the “old man” is resurrected daily, it is now our duty to discover what new forms the “old man” assumes from day to day.

The “old man” may be a polished, refined, highly cultured self, well educated and honorable.

He may have excellent tastes in art, literature, and music, and move in the best social circles. But there is no real difference between what we think of as a reprehensible “old man” and this highly cultured, proud self, except that the latter may be more difficult to apprehend and bring to the cross.

The “old man” may be fond of doing good works in his family or community.

He may enjoy civic leadership, joining idealist clubs, laboring all the time to do a good work while he fails to see the best work. Politicians do a great amount of good; and there are among them many good men and women. But how easily the plaudits of men become a cherished laurel wreath, and pride becomes the reward of service. The “old man” bears away the victory.

The most difficult form the “old man” assumes is that of the religious self, finding an outlet for his sinful pride in pious praying, exhorting, and even

preaching. Spiritual pride is enhanced by the very sacrifices self makes.

In fact, no one needs more carefully to guard against the subtle rebirth of the “old man” than the gospel minister. The performance of his duties, even so-called evangelism, can become most deadly stumbling blocks to real fellowship with Christ if the principle of the cross is not accepted daily.

Such labor wrought in self becomes fatal because it is a sinful, self-seeking expression of the “old man’s” existence.

This is the reason why the Lord Jesus will be obliged to disclose startling tragedies in the last day: “Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name? cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” Matthew 7:22, 23. They had worked evil because it was self that worked.

ALL THAT SELF DOES IS DEADLY SIN

Since the preaching of the cross is the “power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18), any preaching which denies the principle of the cross can be nothing else than Satan trying to edge his way in, with the “old man” acting as his agent.

When self does the work, the “old man” is sure that he has been doing it in Christ’s name, as Jesus said that “many” would protest to Him in the last day that all the good they had done was done in His name.

Those “many” to whom the Lord must at last deny personal knowledge are a pitiable group. They have felt so sure all along that they were enlisted in Christ’s service. They have been ready to praise the Lord for the wonderful works accomplished, not realizing that their confidence was dependent on the results they thought *they* saw. They saw their work, not Christ. The “old man” lives by sight and not by faith.

They have ever been ready to praise the Lord for the wonderful work they have accomplished, but they have not discerned their pride in their hidden thought that the Lord was fortunate enough to have *them* on hand to enable Him do it. Sometimes the deception is so cruel that even the “very elect” are sorely tempted.

Jesus foresaw this subtle temptation when He tenderly pleaded with the disciples not to yield to the insidious pride of spiritual labor. It was when “the seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons obeyed us when we gave them a command in Your name’” (Luke 10:17, TEV), that Jesus’ mind flashed back to the original sin in Lucifer’s heart in heaven when he was a minister, even the “anointed cherub who covers.”

He quickly saw how easily the excitement of the disciples’ rich success could become as Lucifer’s pride. “Jesus answered them: ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Listen! . . . Don’t be glad because the evil spirits obey you; rather be glad because your names are written in heaven.’” Luke 10:18-20, TEV. If Jesus’ words were more heeded by pastors, evangelists, bishops, and other church

administrators, how many sincere ministers might be able to overcome the deceptive pressures of ministerial pride!

PAUL HAD A DEEP INSIGHT INTO THIS POSSIBILITY OF TRAGEDY

He tells us of his conviction that should the gospel worker be willing to confess his “work” a failure *before* the last day, “he himself will be saved yet so as through fire.” 1 Corinthians 3:15. Only through such an experience of humbling of heart before God can one be enabled to build upon the foundation a lifework of “gold, silver, precious stones” that shall endure the “fire” of ultimate judgment. Verses 12, 13.

All work founded on anything other than Jesus Christ will prove at last to be only “wood, hay, straw.” Verses 12, 15. George MacDonald has said, “Nothing saves a man more than the burning of his work, except the doing of work that can stand in the fire.”—*Unspoken Sermons*, page 147.

It is easy for the “old man” to covet the honors that follow religious service, especially within a community of people professing to be “spiritual Israel.” With them, the seeking of worldly fame and honor has been supposedly “crucified” and there are no opportunities for gratifying the human craving for worldly preeminence. If the “old man” is not crucified daily, his craving for eminence is sublimated in a desire to be an honored leader in the gaze of the limited religious community. As the church increases in prestige and glitz, her “prophets” are thus more and more liable to the deceptive snare of a modern species of Baal

worship—self worship disguised as worship of Christ.

THE “OLD MAN” IS EVEN MORE CRUEL IN HIS DECEPTIONS

Another manifestation the “old man” may assume is that of trust in the rapturous ecstasy of a glorious power in us and through us.

The temptation is strong to regard miracles as proof of the blessing of God. How could the “old man” be involved in a miracle demonstration? Would not denial of miracle power be a denial of God? Not necessarily.

It is not beyond the power of the fallen Lucifer to work miracles. “No wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.” 2 Corinthians 11:14. Are we so sure that we can unerringly distinguish from the genuine work of the Holy Spirit the work of such an “angel of light”? “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” 1 Corinthians 10:12.

Our Saviour has kindly warned us: “False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.” Matthew 24:24.

Answers to prayer can seem such bona fide evidence of God’s special favor and activity on our behalf that we may not realize how much the “old man” is enjoying the experience of pride that seems to lift us above our fellowmen. Dropping names is a common example of one’s pride in knowing the high and mighty in this world; the poor fellow who

doesn’t know these great people is left to wallow in his envy.

Pride in one’s answers to prayer can likewise arise from one’s assumption that he is, like the Pharisees of old, a favorite of Heaven, someone better than the common run of humanity who seem to be denied these miraculous demonstrations in their honor. The part that self played in the glorious experience is not easily discerned.

THE CROSS BECOMES THE BASIS FOR FINAL JUDGMENT

Look again at that pathetic group who in the judgment remonstrate with Christ, “Have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” Doubtless they have always *assumed* that their works were done in answer to their prayers in Christ’s name. They prayed; and they received undeniable results that were astounding to everybody. But it is clear that the answers to their prayers were not from Christ at all, because He is obliged to tell them sadly, “I never knew you.” Matthew 7: 22, 23.

Somebody knew them, because there were undeniable miracles in answer to their prayers. If Jesus says that it was not *He* who knew them, who could it have been?

We have seen that Satan has the power to appear as an “angel of light,” a “false christ” who “performs great signs.” Indeed, he seems to have a connection with heaven, “so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men.” But his real character lies concealed

in these miracles. John adds that he “deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast.” Revelation 13:13, 14. *Miracles are thus no test of genuine Christian experience.*

Nothing may be more difficult to recognize as honor for the “old man” than the rapturous ecstasy of a glorious experience, the psychic movings of some supernatural power in us and through us. But signs and wonders are becoming the peculiar stock in trade of the false christ, or Baal in his modern form.

If it is possible for the “old man” of self to reappear in gospel preaching and ministry, it is also possible for Baal to bless and prosper his prophets in their work. The “christ” of our feelings, or our emotions, is not infallible, but the Christ of the Bible, of the cross, of truth, is infallible. The two must not be confused!

The last temptation is the greatest treason:

To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

—T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

Either Christ or Satan will be the eventual object of every soul’s heart service, with no middle ground possible in the final crisis yet to come. Since Satan well knows that but few will ever knowingly and openly choose is service, he is obliged to make it *appear* that the worship of self is the worship of Christ, because it is in man’s devotion to self that Satan claims as allegiance to his principles. This is the genius of the “antichrist.”

Skillfully he is preparing for the last great conflict, hoping to sweep into his ranks the multitudes of

earth, including the “elect” through the avenue of a devotion to self which appears on the surface to be devotion to Christ. Many will not discern that their very motive of service has been either a desire for reward for themselves, or a craven fear of punishment. Like a fickle populace in the changing fortunes of war, they were ready to submit to whoever offers in his hand the prizes of reward or wields the sword of power, irrespective of a genuine appreciation of his character.

The “old man” will obsequiously submit to whoever has the upper hand.

BUT CHRIST WILL ACCEPT NO SUCH SERVICE BASED ON FORCE

There must, therefore, come a test to every soul to prove his/her deepest heart devotion. That test is one’s response to the way of the cross. Day by day the test continues.

When one is sick or injured, proper medical care may sometimes involve painful experiences. But no one in his right mind will refuse the pain that leads to health and renewed life.

The way of the cross is likewise a health-giving experience. The “deceitfulness of sin” may make the bearing of the cross seem unpleasant, but when one is brought up “out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay,” and one’s feet are “set . . . upon a rock,” joy follows the pain as surely as day follows night. The “rock” is Christ and the “miry clay” is the constant bewilderment and confusion of domination by the “old man” of self and sensuality. Psalm 40:1, 2.

Are you weary of your fear, your killing anxiety,
your envy of others, your sense of insecurity, your
haunting awareness of vanity?

Let your feet be set on that solid rock where the
cross is planted. What joy will be yours to say, “He .
. . has put a new song in my mouth—praise to our
God!” Verse 3.

The Lord is my light, then why should I fear?

By day and by night His presence is near.

He is my salvation from sorrow and sin.

This blessed persuasion the Spirit brings in.

—James Nicholson