

Ex-Mormon Shares How Philippians 3 Helped Him Escape Legalism

Martin Luther once wrote, "The world is like a drunken peasant. If you lift him into the saddle on one side, he will fall off again on the other side." By the fall of 1998, I came to realize that I was that drunken peasant. For 20 years I had toiled under the legalistic construct of Mormonism, and with very little to show for it. Bright and shiny on the outside, filthy beyond description on the inside. And spiritually dead; deader than dead.

Upon leaving the Mormon faith, I wandered out into the world for close to a decade, denying myself very little of what the world had to offer. But a funny thing happened to me on my way to abandoning God—I began to really miss Him. I missed His guidance and strength and peace. I remember wanting to call out to Him but was unable to muster up the courage to do so. I was afraid He would a) call me to repentance (something I wasn't too excited about doing), and b) tell me to go back to the Mormon church and obey all those rules again in order to regain fellowship with Him. Mormon God was the only God I knew, and so I kept my distance.

But like a hooked marlin, I began to feel that unmistakable tug toward the fishing boat I couldn't see. God was reeling me in. In the spring of 1999, I stumbled into a little Bible-teaching, nondenominational church called Calvary Chapel Westgrove. I wore a shirt and tie; everyone else was in shorts and flip-flops. The pastor stood up, looked out over this motley crew and said, "Hey, we want to welcome everyone here this morning as we gather together to worship the Lord and to celebrate God's *free gift* of eternal life!"

God's what? Free gift? You mean to tell me that I'm not good enough, and God already knows that and wants me to live forever with Him in heaven anyway? Christ purchased my salvation already, and church is a celebration of that fact? Oh man, I just don't know about all this!

My mind was thrown into a complete state of disarray, but my heart ... my heart was doing back-flips inside of me. God's Spirit had pierced me through and through, and I would never be the same.

Even so, my flesh refused to give up the fight *that* easily. And so I entered into the "I think Christ did it all, but just in case He didn't, I had better do my part" phase of my pitiful Christian walk. I say pitiful because here I was trying to live out the Christian life, yet was not empowered to do so because I was not yet born again of God's Spirit! And I was not yet born again because I was still clinging to the "co-op" view of salvation: Jesus did this for me, I do this for Jesus (obedience and good works). My inflated ego, mixed in with 20 years of false religious indoctrination, was keeping me from true spiritual rebirth.

Paul came to this very same conclusion. In his letter to the Philippians, he talks about what a superstar Jew he had been: of the tribe of Benjamin, a zealous Pharisee, absolutely perfect in terms of obeying God's law! And yet there came that moment when he realized that none of those things were of any eternal value to him at all. He writes, "I ... count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:8-9, NASB).

Philippians 3 saved my life. Let me rephrase that: God, by sending His Son to suffer and die for my sins, saved my life. But it took Paul articulating God's terms of salvation to finally switch on that little light bulb over my head. *Now I*

get it! When Christ said “It is finished,” he was saying that he indeed purchased our salvation on the cross that dark day. And He paid for it in full; Christ did it all. That’s why He’s not asking for our help! God’s *free gift* of eternal life is just that: a gift, purchased by our Savior, with His own blood. *Wow! OK, now I can live.*

It’s difficult sometimes to put into words what it means and what it feels like to be essentially dead to myself, yet alive with the Spirit of Christ in me. What I can say is this: I am more alive now than ever. I don’t fear life anymore because I don’t fear death. I am at peace with God and with myself (Rom. 5:1). And I no longer feel that awful tension between myself and God—due to my intense legalism (and failure to live up to all the rules) or my sinfulness and rebellion. As one writer put it, “the ‘oughts’ of God have become the ‘wants’ of my heart.”

I am finally sitting comfortably in the saddle—and the ride is spectacular.

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