

Throw Off Your Graveclothes!

The enemy can keep you bound if you don't remove the trappings that allowed him to enslave you. It's time to get free!

Despite the threat of the Jews who were lying in wait to kill Him, Jesus had to return to Judea. He had an assignment there to challenge death, just as He had done in Nain with the widow's son (see Luke 7:11-17).

His close friend Lazarus, Mary and Martha's brother, had already been dead in the tomb for four days. Those who knew said the stench of decaying flesh was already prominent. Just thinking about it broke Jesus' heart.

When Jesus arrived, the family of the deceased led Him to the little hillside cave. Once there, He told them to remove the stone slab that covered the opening. He looked up to heaven, thanked the Father for always hearing Him, then boldly shouted, "Lazarus, come out!"

Immediately, all those standing by heard a rustling inside. Lazarus, who by now seemed to be little more than a wrapped-up cadaver, stumbled out of the darkness into the bright sunlight.

Jesus said, "'Unwrap him and let him loose.'" Many of the Jews who witnessed the miracle believed in Him (John 11:1-45, The Message, selectively paraphrased).

Astonishing! One moment, Lazarus was dead ... and the next, he was alive. This story is a wonderful illustration of our new-birth experience. One minute we were spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins; a moment later, we were alive in Christ (see Eph. 2:1; Col. 2:13). Phenomenal!

Can you imagine how exciting it must have been to watch Lazarus exit that tomb after he had been dead for four days?

Now Lazarus was indeed alive. But if he was going to enjoy and effectively live his new life, one more thing was necessary: The graveclothes he wore in death would have to be removed.

You may need to be freed from your spiritual graveclothes (see Eph. 5:8). Only then will you be free to truly enjoy your new life and live it effectively for God's glory.

It's one thing for God to forgive us, cleanse us and breathe into us His eternal life. (That's the new birth.) It's another thing altogether for us to remove the graveclothes—things that relate to our former lives when we were dead in trespasses and sins.

We may be spiritually alive in Christ, but if we remain wrapped in the clothes of spiritual death, we'll continually struggle with satanic accusation and self-condemnation. This is a matter of being delivered from an old mind-set.

You Need Deliverance

God's deliverance is the outworking of justification and sanctification in our lives. From the moment we're born again, we're continually being delivered from unbiblical thinking, from the sinful habits of our former lifestyles, and even from the attachments any evil spirits might have to us, whether from generational sins, our own acts of disobedience or trauma we've experienced.

The United States is one of the few nations in which Christians are seldom brought through personal deliverance after they've been reborn. In most developing nations, converts to Christianity are usually first-generation believers whose parents and grandparents worshiped idols (demon gods). For them, deliverance is presumed to be an elemental first step after coming to Christ, a foundational preparation for living the Christian life.

Don't forget that it was Jesus' faithful follower Mary

Magdalene, "out of whom He had cast seven devils," to whom Jesus first revealed Himself on the morning of His resurrection (see Mark 16:9, NKJV).

In the early 1990s, a couple of years after the Soviet Union collapsed, my wife, Alice, and I ministered in Riga, the capital of Latvia. On one bitterly cold and snowy Sunday night, we decided to visit one of the city's fastest-growing churches.

The evening service was packed with Latvians and Russians. We sat bundled up in every article of warm clothing we had because there was no heat in the building. But that didn't cool down the fiery passion and hunger for God among the several thousand people in attendance. At the conclusion of the altar call, nearly 50 of them came forward to receive salvation.

The next step was one I believe we should adopt in the United States. The pastor had the new Christians turn and face the crowd. He led them corporately to renounce their old lives of sin, all occult and cultic involvement, and all associations with evil spirits; then he led them in a prayer of commitment to follow Christ in believer's baptism, to be faithful to the fellowship of believers, to tithe on their incomes and to walk in accountability. God was glorified that night!

Have you ever truly considered how lost you were when Christ found you? In Ephesians 2:1-3 (NIV), Paul writes:

"You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

When we sin, we cooperate with the enemy and open doors to

him. It's one thing for God to forgive our sins, which He does when we confess them.

However, it's another thing for us to close the doors we've opened to darkness and take back the ground we've given the devil. When we do this, we are enforcing God's law against the lawless one; we are canceling the lingering contracts with darkness we have ignored. They are what have empowered Satan to harass us.

Self-Sabotage

I'm a PK (preacher's kid) who was saved when I was very young. From that moment I knew God had cleansed me and forgiven me of my sins. I'd even memorized the verses that proved it.

But it didn't take long for me to realize that born-again Christians also sin. Through the years I've failed the Lord on many occasions, so confessing sin has become for me more than a doctrine—it's a regular practice (see 1 John 1:9).

Revelation 12:10 says Satan is our accuser, and he certainly wasted no time accusing me. Even after I became a minister, the devil warred against my mind, assaulting me with thoughts such as, What about that sin you committed when you were only 13?

On those occasions, I didn't know what to do to stop Satan's accusing voice, even though I was certain God had cleansed and forgiven me for what I had done. And when the devil wasn't accusing me, I found myself entertaining self-condemning thoughts. I couldn't seem to forgive myself for sins I'd committed.

The self-condemnation only fueled my mental torment: self-sabotage. I was told to take those thoughts captive and bring them under the obedience of Christ (see 2 Cor. 10:5); however, constantly wrestling with them in my own strength took my focus off God, consumed my energy, and kept me from attaining

higher heights and deeper depths with Christ.

I knew things were right in heaven, yet when I told the accuser my sins were forgiven, he refused to listen. Now I know why: He still held the contracts I'd signed in my sin, the original agreements that had opened the door and allowed him legal right to my life.

He was standing on ground I'd deeded to him. Because I had yielded that ground, I was the one who would have to destroy the contracts and take it back.

One glorious day God showed me how to pull the rug out from under the enemy's feet. After learning the lesson, I tore up the contracts, took back the territory and summarily dismissed the devil. It was awesome!

Perhaps you were taught not to look back at your past—especially at sins committed before you were saved. You were told God had cleansed you from those sins, had graciously removed them as far as the east is from the west and would never remember them against you again (see Ps. 103). All of this is true, of course.

We are new creations. We have been forgiven for past sins (see 2 Cor. 5:17).

But there is more to this issue of our former sins than how they affect our relationships with God. How they affect us is also important, as is how they affect the kingdom of darkness. We dare not overlook this.

The Burden of False Guilt

The blood of Jesus has removed the guilt of our sins forever (see Heb. 10:10,14). But again, I'm not talking about real guilt; I'm talking about false guilt in the forms of satanic accusation and self-condemnation.

Yes, God no longer remembers the sins you've confessed, but

you remember them, and the devil will take advantage of that. Satan and his evil minions will use anything they can to keep you beaten down. They will use everything from “It’s been two days since you’ve read your Bible—how can you call yourself a Christian?” to “Sure, you’ve asked God to forgive your adultery, but you can never make it up to Him or to your spouse. You’re a loser—face it, God will never be able to use you.”

If you’re being victimized by these kinds of thoughts, consider the following story:

Little Johnny, while visiting his grandparents’ farm, was given a slingshot to play with in the woods. He practiced, but he could never hit a target. He was deeply discouraged when he headed back to the house for dinner.

As he walked the path, he noticed his grandmother’s pet duck. Impulsively, he aimed his slingshot and released a stone; the duck was hit square in the head and died instantly.

Johnny was shocked and grieved. He hadn’t meant to do it. In a panic, he hid the duck in the woodpile, not realizing at first that his sister was watching. Sally had observed it all, but she said nothing.

After dinner that night, when Grandma said, “Sally, let’s wash the dishes,” Sally replied, “Grandma, Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen.”

Then she leaned over and whispered, “Johnny, remember the duck?” So Johnny did the dishes.

The next day, when Grandpa asked the children if they wanted to go fishing, Grandma said, “I’m sorry, but I need Sally to help me prepare dinner.”

Sally grinned. “Grandma, Johnny told me that he wanted to help prepare dinner.” She whispered again, “Remember the duck?” So

Sally went fishing, and Johnny stayed to help Grandma.

After several days of doing both his and Sally's chores, Johnny couldn't stand it any longer. He went to Grandma and tearfully confessed what he'd done.

She knelt down, gave him a hug and said: "Sweetheart, I know. I was standing at the window, and I saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I was just wondering how long you'd let Sally make a slave of you."

Perhaps you can identify with Johnny. No matter what past sins you've confessed that the enemy keeps throwing in your face—lying, fornication, fear, rebellion, hatred, anger, addiction, unforgiveness, stealing, adultery, abortion, drunkenness or anything else—you need to know that Jesus was standing at the window. He witnessed the whole thing.

He loves you. He has cleansed and forgiven you. He's just wondering how long you'll needlessly allow Satan to enslave you.

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