

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 15

Can you trust the Holy Spirit to save you?

A friend recently said that the main reason he was baptized 20 some years ago is that he wanted to receive the power of the Holy Spirit so that he could overcome all his sins.

His intentions were good, but his understanding was a bit flawed. (No one understands perfectly, of course, and we are saved by God's mercy despite our misunderstandings.)

The Holy Spirit is not something we can “switch on” to achieve our overcoming goals, like some kind of supercharger for our willpower. The Holy Spirit is God, present with us and in us, giving us the love, assurance and close fellowship that the Father has for us in Christ. Through Christ, the Father has made us his own children, and the Holy Spirit gives us the spiritual sense of knowing that (Rom. 8:16).

The Holy Spirit gives us intimate fellowship with God through Christ, but he does not suspend our ability to sin. We still have wrong desires, still have wrong motives, still have wrong thoughts, words and actions. Even though we may want to stop a particular habit, we find that we are still unable to do it. We know that it is God's will for us to be freed from this problem, but for some reason we still seem to be powerless to shake its influence over us.

Can we believe that the Holy Spirit really is at work in our lives—especially when it seems like nothing is really happening, because we are not being very “good” Christians? When we struggle with sin again and again, when it seems like we are not changing much at all, do we conclude that we are so messed up that not even God can fix the problem?

Babies and adolescents

When we come to faith in Christ, we are born again, regenerated, by the Holy Spirit. We are new creatures, new persons, babes in Christ. Babies are not powerful, not skilled, not self-cleaning. As they grow, they acquire some skills, and they also begin to realize that there is a lot they cannot do, and this sometimes leads to frustration. They fidget with the crayons and scissors and fret that they cannot do as well as an adult can. But the fits of frustration do not help—only time and practice will help.

This is true in our spiritual lives, too. Sometimes new Christians are given dramatic power to break a drug habit or a bad temper. Sometimes new Christians are instant “assets” to the church. But more often than not, it seems, new Christians struggle with the same sins they had before, have the same personalities they had before, have the same fears and frustrations. They are not spiritual giants.

Jesus has overcome sin, we are told, but it sure seems like sin still has a grip on us. The sin nature within us has been defeated, but it still treats us like we are its prisoners. O wretched people that we are! Who will save us from the law of sin and death? Jesus, of course (Romans 7:24-25). He has already won the victory—and he has made that victory ours.

Alas! We do not yet see the complete victory. We do not yet see his power over death, nor the complete end of sin in our lives. As Hebrews 2:8 says, we do not yet see all things under our feet. What we do is trust Jesus. We trust his word that he has won the victory, and we trust his word that in

him we too are victorious.

Still, even though we know we are clean and pure in Christ, we would also like to see progress in overcoming our personal sins. Such progress may seem excruciatingly slow at times, but we can trust God to do what he has promised—in us as well as in others. After all, it is his work, not ours. It is his power, not ours. It is his agenda, not ours. When we submit ourselves to God, we have to be willing to wait on him. We have to be willing to trust him to do his work in us in the way and at the speed he knows is right.

Adolescents often think they know more than Dad knows. They think they know what life is all about and that they can handle it all pretty well on their own. (Not all adolescents are like that, of course, but the stereotype is based on some evidence.) We Christians can sometimes think in a way similar to adolescents. We may begin to think that “growing up” spiritually is based on right behavior, which leads us to start thinking of our standing with God in terms of how well we are behaving. When we are behaving well, we might tend to look down on people who don’t appear to have their act together so well. When we aren’t behaving so well, we might fall into despair and depression, believing God has left us.

But God does not ask us to make ourselves right with him; he asks us to trust him, the one who justifies the wicked (Rom. 4:5), who loves us and saves us for the sake of Christ. As we mature in Christ, we rest more firmly in God’s love demonstrated supremely for us in Christ (1 John 4:9). And as we rest in him, we look forward to the day described in Revelation 21:4: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Perfection!

When that day comes, Paul says, we will be changed in the twinkling of an eye. We will be made immortal, imperishable, incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:52-53). And God redeems the inner person, not just the outer. He changes our innermost being, from weak and corruptible, to glorious and (most important of all) sinless.

Instantly, at the last trump, we will be changed. Our bodies will be redeemed (Rom. 8:23), but more than that, we will finally see ourselves as God has made us to be in Christ (1 John 3:2). We will then see plainly the as-yet-invisible reality that God has made true in Christ.

Through Christ, our old sin nature has been defeated and demolished. In fact, it is dead. “For you have died,” Paul puts it, “and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). The sin that “so easily entangles us” and which we strive to “throw off” (Heb. 12:1) is not part of the new person God has made us to be in Christ. In Christ, we have new life.

At Christ’s appearing, we will at last see ourselves as our Father has made us in Christ. We will see ourselves as we really are, as perfect in Christ, who is our true life (Col. 3:3-4). It is for this reason, because we have already died and been raised with Christ, that we work to “put to death” whatever in us is earthly (v. 5).

We overcome Satan (and sin and death) in only one way—by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:11). It is through the victory of Jesus Christ, won on the cross, that we have victory over sin and death, not through our struggles against sin. Our struggles against sin are expressions of the fact that we are in Christ, that we are no longer enemies of God, but his friends, in fellowship with him through the Holy Spirit, who works in us both to will and to do God’s good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

Our struggle against sin is not the cause of our righteousness in Christ. It does not produce holiness. God’s own love and grace toward us in Christ is the cause, the only cause, of our righteousness. We are made righteous, redeemed from all sin and ungodliness, by God through Christ because God is full of love and grace, and for no other reason. Our struggle against sin is the product of the new and righteous self we have been given in Christ, not the cause of it. Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8).

We hate sin, we struggle against sin, we want to avoid the pain and sorrow for ourselves and others that sin produces, because God has made us alive in Christ and the Holy Spirit is at work in us. It is because we are in Christ that we fight the sin which

“so easily entangles us” (Heb. 12:1). But we gain the victory not through our own efforts, not even our own efforts as empowered by the Holy Spirit. We gain the victory through the blood of Christ, through his death and resurrection as the incarnate Son of God, God in the flesh for our sakes.

God has already done in Christ everything that needed doing for our salvation, and he has already given us everything we need for life and godliness simply by calling us to know him in Christ. And he did this simply because he is so almighty good (2 Peter 1:2-3).

The book of Revelation tells us that there will come a time when there will be no more crying and no more tears, no more hurt and no more pain, and that means no more sin, for it is sin that causes pain. Suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, the darkness will end and sin will no longer be able to deceive us into thinking we are still its prisoners. Our true freedom, our new life in Christ, will shine forever with him in all its glorious splendor. In the meantime, we trust the word of his promise.

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