2013-12-28

The Magi #1

Hi all,
When I was about 17 I got into a heated argument with my mother about faith. At the time, I was focused on scriptures that talked about the victory of faith, and told my mother words to the effect, 'If you have enough faith, you won't have problems, because scripture says we have overcome the world.'

Mom was about 41 years old at the time and was raising 4 kids on her own after dad had left 6 years earlier, so she had experienced the great joy of raising a family according to how she dreamed life would be, then experienced the shattering of all those dreams. Like someone carefully walking barefoot across a room littered with pieces of a broken mirror, her dreams which once were a solid reflection back to her, now lay scattered and incomplete, never to be assembled again, and any misstep among the pieces could cut her and cause great pain to her and her children.

I was still wet behind the ears, had never paid a mortgage or related bills, and the paychecks from summer jobs if measured out carefully, allowed Barb and I to go on dates through the school year.

With me standing firm on my belief that with enough faith a person could have a smooth life with the fulfillment of all their dreams, and mom standing firm on her belief that faith helped you walk through life's troubles, she brought it to a close with this: "You just need a few more miles under your feet."

The culture of church
When I studied the differences between the way Paul did church and the way church is done in the traditional church today, I saw the differences were more than meeting in an auditorium or meeting in a home.

The culture taught in popular charismatic Christianity is very similar to what I argued with my mom - If you have enough faith, can rebuke the right demon, can move God enough, speak the Word enough, can find that 1 spiritual key to unlock the answers you need, you will have a smooth life. That was me until age 22.

Miles under the feet
That change in our life happened when our oldest son, at age 8 months, was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, a condition referring to any brain injury incurred during labor or delivery. The doctor told Barb to "Put him in a home and forget you ever had him, and go on and have more babies and raise your family and live your life."
She was in tears when she called me at work, her anguish becoming mine over Chris' condition, our hearts ripped to shreds while indignant at the doctor's suggestion.

That night we gave Chris his bath, and carefully wrapped him in a warm blanket and laid him on the soft bath mat. As he lay looking up at us, we laid hands on him, telling the Father we reject the doctor's diagnosis and advice, commanded Chris to be healed, and gave thanks to the Father for the gift of Chris.

Help God along
We stood on the Word, but as he grew it became clear the diagnosis was correct. We learned faith does not call what is as though it is not. Faith is not the denial of facts one must deal with in the here and now.

Chris went through various tests while we stood on the Word and sought the key to the puzzle of his healing. What could we pray, fast, confess, bind, loose, to get the job done? We debated if giving him physical and speech therapy was in faith, or against faith. We spent every penny on getting him whatever therapy might help bring about God's healing in his body. We looked for ways to help God, willing to try nearly anything to help bring about God's promises in his life.

One day I was yet again speaking scripture over him and suddenly the Father broke in: "What are you doing?" He asked. "I'm speaking the Word over him". "What scripture are you standing on?" He

asked. I replied, "I Peter 2:24; Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we being dead to sins should live unto righteousness. By whose stripes you were healed." He replied, "Very well. Can you believe the promise?" I said, "Yes, I believe" And He said, "Then rest."

At that point I went from trying to make things happen by my faith, to resting in the fact His Word is true and faith in Him is rest, as Hebrews 4:9-11 says of faith, when we cease our own efforts and simply rest in Him.

Faith: The response to grace
But much of traditional church culture is still trying to make things happen by faith. What I read in the Bible however is that faith is merely a response to grace. Grace makes it happen, and grace is a revelation from the Father either of Him or of His will. Faith is our response to grace, and grace is a revelation of the Father and/or His will.

Noah didn't build a boat of his own intiative. He received grace in the eyes of the Lord, and from that revelation he built a boat. Moses didn't just change his mind and decide to go down to Egypt, he had a revelation of God's plan, which was grace, and he responded. Even Jesus said He only did and said what He saw and heard the Father say and do. (John 5:19,30)

Faith is not independent of the revealed will of God, faith is the response to the revelation of His will. I stopped pulling verses from scripture at will and deciding that would be what I'm standing on. Instead, I communed with the Lord and let revelation come to me, and then I believed and rested in that revelation.

I realized at one point as much as I want Chris to be healed, Chris' faith is set on what he has stated many times; "When I get to heaven, no wheelchair" and upon seeing kids run, "When I get to heaven I'm going to run like that!"

I had a visitation once with Chris seated on my right side in his wheelchair, and Jesus standing on my left, teaching me about healing and how hard it is for someone who has never known wholeness to believe for their healing. I SO wanted to interrupt and tell Him to lay hands on my son, but He is God and I'm not, so that's not something you do in the presence of the King. But I gained insight into Chris' mind that night.

Chris' faith isn't to be healed now, his faith is set for heaven, and to that the Lord has responded. One day Chris came crawling down the hall very excited: "Dad, dad! Know what Jesus said to me? He said He's going to walk through the mountains with me! Yep, that's what He said, Yahoo! Yep, He's going to walk through the mountains with me, that's what He said!"

Worst parents?
When the time arrived we had to make the hardest decision of our lives, by far, to put Chris in a group home which at the time was nearly 2 hours away from us, we felt like the worst people on earth. The worst parents.

In our despair we talked long into the night, but Barb eventually drifted off to sleep while I lay there still talking to the Father. I was saying, "Father, if you aren't going to heal him, just take him home. Barb and I have both been to heaven, we've each seen you, we've each seen the Lord, so we would rather have our son whole in heaven than to live the rest of his life in his damaged body. Even if we live say, 50 more years, I'd rather miss him and long for him those many years than to have him live in a group home the rest of his life."

Suddenly, Jesus was standing in my room. My eyes were open and I saw Him and our room as I normally would, just that the Lord was standing there. Without a word of greeting He said: "Would you have me bring Chris home early, having him miss out on the fullness of his reward, just because you feel bad for having to put him in a group home?"

I was dumbfounded. "I, I, am sorry Lord. I had never considered his reward. I know when I am gone ministering and he and Barb are home allowing me to go out, they take part in the ministry, but I hadn't truly known that until right now. No, I want Chris to receive the fullness of his reward, even if that means hardship for us and him, for we value heaven more than earth. But only with these conditions;

That he never be molested nor suffer neglect." Jesus nodded His head sharply downward once as He said, "Done", and He was gone.

As I write this, on December 21, Chris will turn 34 on Monday the 23rd. The whole family is coming for his birthday party and Christmas, both his brothers, both daughters in law, and all 6 of his nieces and nephew. He loves the Lord and continues to look forward to his new body in heaven, but until then....

By the time Paul wrote his letter to Lydia, the original hostess of the house church in Philippi, he had been through very great difficulties related to persecution and hazardous travel of the time. When he wrote Philippians 4:11-13 he had come to the point in his life he could say this:

"I have learned whatever state I'm in, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and how to abound. Everywhere and in all things **I am instructed** both to be full and hungry, to abound and to suffer need..."

This phrase in English, 'I am instructed', is closer to this in the Greek; ***"I have been initiated into the mysteries***". Paul reveals the core mystery: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Next week - Initiation into the mysteries. Until then, blessings,
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2014-01-04

The Magi #2

Hi all,
When I entered Indiana University (IU) in the summer of 1976, I was invited to join the fraternity my dad had been a member of, Phi Kappa Psi, or Phi Psi for short.

I started the first semester of my freshman year as a 'Pledge', meaning I had pledged to become a Phi Psi and they had pledged to receive me - if I fulfilled the requirements. There were about 15 in my (freshman) Pledge class and a total of 95 men living under the same roof, with an older couple who served as 'house parents' and cooked for us, but we were pretty much self-governing, with upperclassmen being President, Vice President, etc.

That first semester included a lot of 'hazing', the ritualistic harassment of the incoming class culminating in 'hell week', which I might add, was appropriately named. The upper classmen treated us like new Marine recruits, complete with hundreds of push ups at a time, yelling at us nose to nose, telling us we were lower than a snake's belly and unworthy of being called a Phi Psi, and more.

After all, 7 time Olympic gold medalist, Mark Spitz, was a Phi Psi from that very house a mere 4 years earlier. Many 'Captains of Industry', doctors, lawyers, Olympians of various sports, CEO's and such were Phi Psi's. My roommate for a semester who was a junior at the time, later became Governor and then US Senator from Indiana - But we freshmen were mere Pledges, wannabe's, and were treated as such.

After that final week of hazing, those that saw it through until the end, were accepted and deemed worthy to have the mysteries of the fraternity revealed to them. We spent a week being taught by upper classmen and alumni how the fraternity was founded by 2 Christian men who wanted to spread the gospel and instill in young men the knowledge of God and His ways (How far their fraternity had fallen by 1976).

We were told of the founding, the secret meanings of the fraternity shield and what the Phi, Kappa, and Psi stood for in our fraternity, and swore an oath to uphold the ideals of the Founders (Which consisted of Christian and Biblical ideals so I had no problem swearing to uphold them).

I was elected Chaplain by the whole house, and with great formality and solemnity, our class was initiated into the mysteries of the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity. Yes there is a secret handshake, but I'd have to kill you if I told you, lol.

But what makes me a Phi Psi is that I've been initiated into the mysteries of the fraternity. Only Phi Psi's know those mysteries, the rest of the world does not. And each fraternity and sorority has similar mysteries to which only members have knowledge.

The Bible speaks of initiation into different mysteries, which I ended with last week. But first...

The Magi
In ancient Mesopotamia there existed a society of what we commonly call 'wise men'. In English they are known as the Magi. The word 'magi' is from the Greek word 'magos', and more directly the Latin 'magus' - the plural is 'magi'. It is where we get the word 'magic', and refers to a secret fraternity of knowledge to which others are not aware. They are 'outside' the fraternity, ignorant of the mysteries only members know.

I don't want to do a whole history lesson on the Magi or 'Wise men' as many English Bibles translate it, but will say they were a class of priests who we see as Daniel's peers (and enemies) serving the various kings of Babylon, Persia, and Media.

They were the ones who could not interpret the different king's dreams and visions, while God gave Daniel the meanings. They looked to the stars, acknowledging the Creator had put them in the sky as He said in Genesis 1:14: "Let them be for signs, seasons, days, and years." They specialized in the 'signs' part through astronomical observations. (Daniel 2:48)

Because of their secret knowledge, they had seen a star move into the constellation regarding Israel, and determined a new King had been born in Israel. No one in Israel knew the sign of the Star of Bethlehem, and even the wise men came to Herod asking where the new King was - but everyone except the Magi were clueless. All Israel and Herod saw the same stars and constellations as the Magi, but were outside the fraternity of knowledge to understand what they were seeing.

Scripture revealed the King would be born in Bethlehem, so the Magi headed there, and upon finding the family in a house gave baby Jesus gifts typical of the day for a King; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Mt 2:11)

My point is that the Magi were part of a fraternity, marked by secret knowledge known only to those in the fraternity. It seems to be human nature to make these secret clubs, from boys climbing tree houses and refusing to let girls enter, to pricking each other's fingers and rubbing the drops of blood together to become 'blood brothers', to little girls not inviting another girl to their imaginary tea party while they told secrets of which boy likes which girl - secrets only they knew and refused to share with the other girl.

Back to Paul
But Paul spoke of a loftier set of mysteries he had been initiated into. His letter to the Philippians, most likely going to Lydia and the church in her house, was the warmest letter Paul wrote to anyone in the New Testament. Many believe Paul's good friend and author of Luke and Acts, Luke, married Lydia and stayed behind in Philippi with her. In Philippians we discover more about Paul's desires and struggles than we do anywhere else in the New Testament.

He continues letting us peer into his soul when he thanks for them for their financial support with this statement in 4:11-13 which we will examine in detail:

"Not that I speak in respect of want, for *I have learned* in whatsoever *state* I am, to be *content*. I know how to be abased and how to abound; every where and in all things *I am instructed* both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

"I have learned" might be better expressed as 'I have entered a new dimension'. The Greek word 'learned' is 'manthano' which is similar to 'mathetes' which means disciple. It refers to someone who has become a learner from (Someone) else, starting a new chapter in life we might say. It is used to express the thought they have come into a new season of life, but more than that, they have grown in knowledge in an area they previously lacked.

And what is that new dimension? He continues: I have learned in whatsoever *state* I am, to be *content*. This doesn't mean Paul could be happy in Rome or Ephesus, it means circumstance or situation he faced.

Paul had entered a new dimension - no matter what circumstance he was in, he could be *'content'*. But don't think of this English word as content like we would use it today. This is not 'I'll go with the flow', or 'I guess I'll be happy' or 'It isn't they way I planned my life, but I'll be okay Lord'. NO!

It is the Greek word 'autarkes', which means "sufficient in oneself". It is made up of 2 words, 'auto', which means 'self', and 'arkeo' which means "to be sufficiently strong, to be enough for a thing" (Vine's). Putting the whole passage together Paul was saying this:

"Not that I am speaking out of need. For I have entered a new dimension in my life, whatever my circumstance are, to be self-sufficient, having enough for whatever I face. I know how to abound and how to suffer lack. I know how to be full and how to be hungry. For I have been initiated into a fraternity of mysteries which is; I can do all things through Christ who strengthen me."

And that's where I'll pick it up next week....blessings!
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2014-01-11

The Magi #3

Hi all,
Some years ago a few of us were helping a church family move to a new home. There were 3 of us trying to convince their refrigerator it could squeeze through the doorway, but it was wedged solidly in the door frame. With a mighty last push and grunt, one of the guys said, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me' and out the refrigerator popped - with a little less paint on the side - but free to be loaded onto the truck.

Using Paul's quote in Philippians 4:13 of 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me' has been used to mean a final push, an extra effort when there is no energy left to expend, to resign oneself to the circumstances and muddle on through.

I've also seen this verse used by people who try to use God to make money. To them, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" means He will help them make a lot of money out of this next business deal if they can just hang in there and grunt their way through the process. In general it has been used every way **except** how Paul actually wrote it.

Just make it work?
Paul said he had learned a secret, 'mysterion' in the Greek, which means *'one who has been initiated into mysteries'*. In Philippians 4:11-13 Paul said he had entered a new dimension in his life, he had been initiated into the mystery that he could be independent of his circumstance - "whatever state I am in, to be *content*", or self sufficient in Christ. He knew how to be hungry or filled, rich or poor, for he had been initiated into the mystery: He could do all things through Christ who strengthens him.

How do we become sufficient in Christ to the point it doesn't matter what swirls around you?

Have you ever felt like this?
I first saw this self-sufficiency in Christ no matter the circumstance in my mom, trying to raise 4 kids with minimal support from our dad and her job.

There were numerous times she came to the end of her strength, the end of her ability, the end of her wits, and just quit her efforts, choosing rather to rest and let the Lord handle the rest. She would face people and the situations - like calling the power company asking for a payment plan so our lights wouldn't be turned off. Talk to our priest about a small loan to get through the week. But she did so knowing the Lord would provide. She didn't shy away from dealing with situations, but she would deal with them knowing He had provided; it was just a matter of discovering how.

Initiation into the mystery that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you comes through being in situations in which you make a choice to end your own efforts, and just turn things to Him.

Pressures squeeze the life out
For instance, in II Corinthians 1:8-11 Paul writes of a time he was convinced he was going to die. In v8 he says he 'even despaired life', which in the Greek means he saw no way out, no way of escape, he was convinced he was going to die.

Also in verse 8 he says this was because he was 'pressed', which means 'weight', or we might say he was being squeezed by a great weight, similar to an olive press pressing and squeezing olives to get the oil from them. Paul was saying his life juices were being squeezed out of him by the situation. He said this squeezing was 'above measure', which means 'above and beyond' normal pressures.

Later in II Corinthians 11:23-28 he listed some of the situations he had been through: Stripes on his back more than he could count, many prisons, 3 times beaten with rods (practice of the day was to beat the bottoms of the feet with rods), once stoned to death (Acts 14:19-20 raised from the dead), 3 times shipwrecked (we have record of one; Acts 27), a night and a day floating on the ocean awaiting rescue.

Besides what he experienced, he then lists the risks taken: Perils of water travel, robbers, threats by the Jews, by unbelievers, threats in city and country, perils among false brethren, and on top of all that, the continual daily burden of all the (house) churches who looked to him for leadership.

It wasn't the difficulties he went through that enabled him to reveal to the Philippians that he knew how to be self-sufficient in any situation in Christ, but it was how he handled these situations that initiated him into this mystery.

Faith is not work
In Hebrews 4:3, 10-11 it says "For we who have believed have entered into rest." and "He who has entered into His rest has ceased from his own works, as God did from His."

Faith is not 'believing' God as ongoing, but 'believed' God. For instance, when I was a teenager I believed in Jesus. I'm not 'believing in Him', I have already believed. Now I walk in what I have believed. I rest in what I believed so many years ago.

Faith isn't something we struggle and wrestle with God about, forcing Him or helping Him bring something into being in our lives. Faith is receiving revelation about the Father and/or His will, and choosing to believe in what you've received. Once received and believed, we rest.

Peter was in prison
Peter was to be executed in the morning. But Acts 12:7 says the rescuing angel, whose presence bathed the jail with light yet that light failed to awaken Peter, had to strike Peter on his side to wake him up. The variation of the Greek word used here, patasso, means to strike, and is used to describe the soldiers hitting Jesus on the face in Matthew 26:51.

How was it the light from the angel failed to awaken Peter, and it took a hit on his side to arouse him, and he was so soundly asleep he was on the street before he woke up and fully realized it wasn't a dream?

It was because in John 21:18 Jesus had prophesied to him how he would die and the circumstances: By crucifixion and when he is old. In Acts 12 they were executing by sword and he was still young, just a few years after the Resurrection. So he was able to sleep soundly, powerless and yet independently sufficient in Christ in that situation. He slept because he had believed, and now rested. That is where peace is found.

Similarly, just before his first of three shipwrecks, an angel appeared to Paul and told him in Acts 27:24, 'Fear not Paul, you must be brought before Caesar'. Because he believed and then rested in that word, the subsequent shipwreck and 2 others, and everything else he went through, he knew he

would get through - because he knew he would appeared before Caesar. He believed, and then rested.

Applying this
In the early 1980's Barb and I faced situations we had no control over. Chris' diagnosis of brain damage, a business situation threatening to take our home and livelihood, a church situation where the pastor who hired me to become senior pastor abruptly changed his mind, leaving me in a holding pattern at that church.

We got to the point we couldn't pray another word, we couldn't think through 'if God did this and I did that', we couldn't rearrange the checkbook any more - and we stopped. We gave it all to the Father. We believed a core truth that He would provide for us, that He had a plan, that He would see us through. That was our initiation into the mystery that we could know abundance and lack, and be internally independent of circumstances in Christ.

What did we do?
The first thing we did was Hebrews 10:32-35 - we called to remembrance the former days and purposed NOT to throw away our confidence - He had a track record of providing for us and we kept those in our minds.

The next thing we did was to take Philippians 4:6-7 literally. I had noticed those verses were not happening for me, for I was as fearful and worry filled at the end of my prayer as I had been at the start. I realized I was disobedient to the outline Paul provided:

1) Be careful for nothing. Stop. Do not proceed to 2) In everything by prayer and supplication make your requests known to God. 3) The peace of God will guard your heart and mind.

I did not proceed to #2 until I got to the point I could have no care, no fear. Only then did I pray. That meant I sometimes wrestled with the fear and worry for 2 weeks before I'd pray. I'd wrestle while worst case scenarios' played in my mind, but each scenario ended with that track record He had of providing for us. When I came to a point of rest and peace, THEN and only THEN did I make my request to Him.

In that way, what Paul said would happen, did happen. The peace of God as stated in 4:7 did 'keep' or 'hem in' or 'guard' my heart and mind. Verses 8 and 9 happened too - I was able to think on good things and the God of peace was with me.

Externally it seemed we were perishing, but internally we had peace, joy, and confidence He would provide and walk us through each situation as we bravely faced each challenge. And He did. And He has. We had been initiated into a great mystery - we knew how to abound and suffer need, to be full and to be hungry, for we had entered a new dimension we've never left as we discovered this truth of initiates: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

New subject next week, blessings,
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