



Volume 9 Issue 9

West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



September 2022

Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Tender Grace

“I see men like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24). What a strange experience. Walking trees are not a normal sight for normal people. But the man who saw “walking trees” was a man in transition. He was at an intermediate stage between total blindness and full clarity of vision. He was, as we shall see, a representative of all Christians in their progress toward pleasing God.

When the Bible records the miracle healings wrought by Jesus, the healings are usually instantaneous and complete. Jesus did not partially raise Lazarus from the dead. The man with the withered arm did not recover in stages. In most other miracles, the person was changed instantly.

So the episode recorded in Mark’s Gospel is unusual. It records the healing of a blind man in two stages:

*And they came to Bethsaida. And they brought a blind man to Him, and entreated Him to touch him. And taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes, and laying His hands upon him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” And he looked up and said, “I see men, for I am seeing them like trees, walking about.” Then again He laid His hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. **Mark 8:22-25, NASB***

This is a story of the power and the grace of Christ. It is a story of *tender grace*. When Jesus was approached by people concerned about the plight of the blind man, the first act He performed was to “take the blind man by the hand.” Holding his hand, Jesus led the man out of town.

Picture the scene. The Son of God surely had the power to heal the man on the spot. Instead, Jesus led him away from the crowd. He ministered to him in private. The blind man was not a spectacle for the curious to gaze upon. Our Lord directed the man’s steps. Never in his life did the blind man have so secure a guide. There was no danger of falling, no menace of tripping. He was being led by the hand of Christ.

Had Jesus’ act of tenderness ended at that point, I’m sure it would have been enough. The blind man could tell the story to his life’s end. “He touched me!” he could exclaim, and he would have savored the experience forever. But Jesus was not finished. He took the next step.

When they were away from the crowd Jesus did something that could offend our sensibilities. He spit on the man’s eyes. Now, to have someone spit in our eye is to experience a shameful, degrading insult. But the purpose of Jesus was not to insult, but to heal. He touched the man and asked him if he could see anything.

It was at this point that the man began to see men as walking trees. He saw what any blind man would give anything to see. His vision was dim, blurred—but he could see. Moments earlier he could see nothing. His eyes were useless. He lived in perpetual darkness. But now, suddenly, he could discern moving forms. He could detect the difference between light and shadow. A new world was opening before him. No longer would he require that someone lead him by the hand. He could throw away his cane.



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Jesus was not finished. He applied a second touch. With the second touch the things that were blurred came into sharp focus. Now the man could clearly distinguish between trees and men. Now he saw trees standing still, their branches swaying gently in the breeze. He saw men as men, walking. He could discern the difference between short men and tall men, fat men and thin men, young men and old men. He was beginning to recognize the minute facial characteristics that provoke recognition of distinctive personal identities. Perhaps he could have done it before by means of touch. Possibly he could have run his fingers over a person's face and recognized certain people. He surely would not have noticed the unique sounds of different people's voices. But now he could keep his hands in his pockets and still know who was standing before him. The first face he saw clearly was the face of Christ. For him it was the beginning of the blessed vision.

Though the Bible doesn't say so, it appears certain that his eyes were not the only part of the man that was healed. With the touch of Christ comes also the healing of the heart. His heart of stone had been changed to a heart of flesh, pulsating anew with spiritual life.

The story of this healing was not intended as just a parable of the Christian's spiritual renewal. The event was a real miracle in space and time, a prodigious display of the power of Christ. But it serves us well as a parallel of spiritual renewal.

The Bible uses the metaphor of blindness to describe our fallen estate. We are all men born blind. We enter this world in a state of spiritual darkness. We do not see the things of the kingdom of God. By nature we have scales upon our eyes, cataracts so thick that we cannot even perceive men as trees, walking. It requires a special act of tender grace for us to see the kingdom of God.

The Beginning - Regeneration

The act of grace by which our eyes are opened to the things of God is *regeneration*, spiritual rebirth. It is an act that only God can perform. We are no more able to regenerate ourselves than a blind man is able to see by a sheer act of the will. A blind man can decide to see, but he cannot see unless his eyes are healed.

Regeneration does not take place in stages. It is instantaneous. It is accomplished by one touch of the Holy Spirit upon our souls. It is a sovereign work, a thoroughly effective work accomplished by the immediate power of the omnipotence of God. Only God can bring something out of nothing and life out of death. Only God can quicken the human soul.

When God quickens a human soul He does it *immediately*. When I say "immediately" I do not mean immediate with respect to time, though indeed it happens spontaneously. I mean by the term that He does it directly without *means*, without the use of secondary causes. (The Latin word *immediatus* actually meant "without intermediary.") When I am sick I do two things. I pray and I take my medicine. I ask that God will bring healing to me by means of the medicine. I ask God to guide the doctor's hands, to guide the means of healing by His special providence.

Yet when Jesus healed the blind man, He did not use any indirect means. No medicine was necessary. Jesus could heal by the sound of His voice. I am puzzled by the narrative at one point.



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Why did Jesus spit upon the man's eyes? Why did He have him bathe in the pool of Siloam? Obviously the power was not in the spit or in the water of the pool. On other occasions Jesus dispensed with such devices. His power was direct and immediate.

So it is with our regeneration. We are required to be bathed with the water of baptism. But the water in the baptismal pool does not contain a magic *elixir* to redeem human souls. The water is a sign that points beyond itself to the living water that makes us alive. It is an outward, concrete symbol of the healing power of God.

There is another parallel, however, in the story of the healing of the blind man. Though we are regenerated instantly by the sovereign power of God and are transferred immediately from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, our sanctification is indeed in stages.

When we are born again we see men as trees, walking. Our spiritual vision is clouded. We do not see all things in sharp spiritual focus. Our vision is still clouded by ongoing sin. There will come a day when all remnants of our old nature will be destroyed. There will come a day when our hearts will be so purified that Christ's beatitude will be fulfilled: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). This is what many Christians in the Middle Ages called the "beatific vision."

The work of perfecting our spiritual state is called *glorification*. Glorification does not take place in this life. We must wait for heaven for our sanctification to be complete. Now, though we see what we could not see before, we still see through a glass darkly.

In this life we need the second touch of Christ. Indeed we require a third, fourth, fifth, and continual touch. Though the scales are removed from our eyes, we still need to be led by the hand of Jesus.

Regeneration is the beginning of a journey. It is a journey with successes and failures, with growth amidst stumbling. At times the progress seems painfully slow, but progress is there. It is a movement to sharper focus—a life that begins with a touch of tender grace that moves toward more grace.

Sisyphus was the tragic hero of an ancient Greek myth. Because he had offended the gods he was doomed to an everlasting hell of repeated and constant frustration. His task was to push a huge boulder up a steep hill. It took all of his strength to move the rock.

Every time he reached the top, the boulder rolled over and crashed once more to the bottom. Sisyphus' task required that he race to the bottom to start all over again. His task was never finished. No final progress was achieved.

Sometimes Christians feel like Sisyphus. Progress seems so slow in the Christian life that it feels like we are walking in place, spinning our wheels, doubling our efforts and gaining no ground.

The image that captures the torture of the damned is the image of the circle. The circle goes round and round with no beginning and no end—merely endless repetition.



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Consider the punishment of Samson. After he revealed the secret of his strength to his traitorous lover, Delilah, he was captured by the Philistines. His dreadful disgrace is summarized by one verse in the Bible:

*Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison. **Judges 16:21**, NASB*

I don't really know what a grinder in a Philistine prison did. I do remember how the job was depicted by Hollywood. I have vague memories of an old film about Samson. Victor Mature played the mighty man of Israel. The scene that sticks in my mind is that of the blinded Samson replacing an ox on the wheel of a grinding machine. The ox was yoked to a lever that turned the gears of the machine as the ox plodded around in a circle, wearing a rut in the ground. I can see Victor Mature with vacant eyes, his muscles glistening with sweat, walking around and around in an endless cycle of toil, getting nowhere, only digging the rut of his path deeper and deeper. That is the brutal image of the circle.

The Continuation - Sanctification

But the Christian life is not futile like that. It does not follow the pattern of the circle. The image of the Christian life is a line. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. There is an end goal of glory. The God who started all things in the beginning has a goal for His people. We reach ahead for the day when we hear Christ say, "*Come, my beloved, enter the kingdom which my Father has prepared for you.*"

With the apostle Paul we say, "*Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:13, NASB). In the Christian life there is an *upward* call. One does not move upward in a circle. We are on a line that is going somewhere. It is moving forward. In a word, there is *progress* to the Christian life.

We remember the classic of Christian literature written by John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The pilgrim is the Christian who moves toward heaven. His progress is made slow and cumbersome by the weight he carries on his back. He faces obstacles at every turn. He is threatened by the Slough of Despond. He is tripped up by the likes of Mr. Worldlywise.

Bunyan understood the many temptations and pitfalls that stand in the path of every Christian. But he also understood two vitally important truths about the Christian life: We are pilgrims, and we make progress.

A pilgrim is one who is on a journey. His travels take him to strange places. He is a person on the move. Like the Old Testament Hebrew, a Christian pilgrim lives in tents. He is a semi-nomad. He is never so at home in this world that he completely settles in. Life is always a frontier for him. The water he drinks is never stagnant. Like Abraham, the father of the faithful, he searches for a better country whose builder and maker is God. All of God's people are pilgrims and sojourners on the earth.



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The Continuation - Sanctification

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All Christians make progress. Progress is made certain by the indwelling Holy Spirit who refuses to allow us to stand still. Oh, we try to stand still. We even regress. Like the disciples, we hide in our upper rooms, huddled in fear. But Jesus will not allow us to stay there.

No one is born a Christian. By nature we are flesh. The Christian life begins with the work of the Holy Spirit in rebirth. The term “born-again Christian” is almost a misnomer. It is a redundancy. It is a kind of theological stuttering. If one is born again, then he is a Christian. If he is a Christian, then he is born again. There are no non-born-again Christians and no born-again non-Christians. To be reborn is to be born into Christ by the Holy Spirit. This is a prerequisite for the Christian life. It is also the genesis, the beginning of the Christian life.

Everyone starts the Christian life the same way: We all start by being born again. Our experiences of rebirth may differ, but the fact of rebirth is necessary for all of us.

It is important for us to understand that no two Christians begin their Christian walk with the same baggage. Some people are born again at five years old, some at fifty-five. Some come to faith from a well-disciplined background, others from a life of riotous and unbridled wildness. We struggle with different sins. We carry mixed and matched luggage.

Some of us know the day and the hour we were converted. Others have no distinct recollection of when we were reborn. Billy Graham speaks of a meeting held by Mordecai Ham where he met Christ. Ruth Graham can't pinpoint within five years the date of her conversion. Some people weep at conversion, others are giddy with joy.

It is a grave mistake to insist that everybody display the same outward signs of conversion that we experienced. Those with a sudden and dramatic conversion experience tend to be suspicious of those who cannot name the day and the hour. Those whose experience is less dramatic may wonder about the emotional stability of those who cite a sudden experience.

Here we must honor the work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts people in different ways at different times. The ultimate question we face is not *when* we were converted or *where* we were converted. The only real question is whether we *are* converted. If we are born of the Spirit, then we are brothers and sisters to all who are in Christ.

Paul tells us:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.
Ephesians 2:8-10, NASB



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The Continuation - Sanctification *Continued from Page 5*

At this point we are all equal. None of us has converted ourselves. Rebirth is the work of God. We are the workmanship or the craftsmanship of Christ. Christ is the master craftsman. His workmanship is neither dull nor monotonous. When He redeems us He does not destroy our identity nor our individuality. Each Christian is a distinctive work of art fashioned by Christ. Each redeemed person is literally a masterpiece.

Jesus does not fashion His art on an assembly line. His work of molding and shaping is done with infinite care and patience. We've seen the bumper sticker that reads, "Please be patient with me; God is not finished with me yet."

Sanctification is a process. It is a gradual process. Run for your life from those who promise you instant sanctification. There is a poisonous doctrine—one that dies hard in Christian circles—called the doctrine of perfectionism. It teaches that some people have already attained spiritual perfection in this world. They promise a "second work of grace," a "second blessing" of instant sanctification. From such teachers turn away.

I was a Christian for only a few months when I met my first preacher of instant sanctification. He offered to lay hands on me and pray that I receive the second blessing. I found the idea very attractive. The most serious frustration I experienced in my new Christian life was that I was still sinning. I had experienced profound victory in some parts of my life, but other areas seemed very stubborn. I was already acutely aware of the ongoing warfare between the flesh and the Spirit.

I prayed with the preacher for instant sanctification. It didn't work. The second blessing eluded me. Martin Luther, who spent so much of his early life trying to be completely righteous, had said, "*If ever a man could get to heaven through monkery [faithfully living the monastic life], it was I.*" I was thinking that if ever a man could get the second blessing by seeking it, it was I.

The preacher was convinced that my sin was blocking my efforts to gain release from my sin. I was caught in the most vicious of circles. What the minister was actually saying to me was that if I was going to get rid of my sin I had to first get rid of my sin. In other words, all I needed before I could get the second blessing was the second blessing.

Finally, another minister helped me out of this hopeless dilemma. I soon realized that the idea of a second blessing that would give me instant sanctification was a pious fraud.

Since that experience I have met two people who claimed they had attained perfect sanctification. Their Christian lives were tragic. For people to convince themselves that they have already achieved spiritual perfection, they must do one or both of two things: They must so reduce the demands of God's law to such a low level that they can obey them, or they must radically inflate their own assessment of their spiritual performance.



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The Continuation - Sanctification

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Either of these steps is deadly. To reduce the demands of God's law is to do violence against the holiness of God. To inflate one's own self-assessment to the point of self-delusion is an extreme form of pride.

Sanctification requires far more than a quick experience of the laying on of hands. Rebirth is instantaneous. Justification is instantaneous. *But sanctification is a lifelong process.* It involves a diligent struggle against a multitude of obstacles. It is like the journey of Bunyan's pilgrim, filled with pitfalls and laden with perils. It is a journey that takes us through the dark night of the soul, through the valley of the shadow of death, and through the wilderness of temptation.

The journey has but one guarantee: Christ promises to go with us and to bring us out the other side. Our Lord finishes what He starts. He does not abort His handiwork in the middle of its creation. He does not leave us staring at walking trees.

No, the Lord is intensely interested in our welfare and our maturing. He wants us to learn more and more about God and how to please God. He wants us to find joy in pleasing God. He wants us to change, like the healed blind man, so that our vision clears, so that we grow in how we perceive the world and how we act in it. Growth and change in such perception means learning more and more about what pleases the holy God. The growth in pleasing God is sanctification. ~ *Pleasing God - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

What is the Patriarchal Blessing?

Christians sometimes struggle to discern whether some aspect of an Old Testament narrative is merely descriptive of a historical event in the life of the biblical character or whether it has theological meaning for us today. Such has been the case with the patriarchal blessings in Genesis 27:26–29 and 48:1–49:28. Some religious groups have perverted the meaning of these unique redemptive-historical events. For instance, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints adheres to a ritual of patriarchal blessing that is equivalent to fortune telling. Each Mormon receives a blessing from his or her bishop that “contains personal revelation and instructions from Heavenly Father.” Mormon “patriarchal blessings” are deeply legalistic and superstitious. Sadly, many Mormons have lamented making major life decisions based on the personal “blessing” they received. Unlike such self-referential and superstitious incantations, the patriarchal blessings in the book of Genesis are covenant blessings in redemptive history; therefore, they anticipate the fulfillment of the spiritual blessings in the coming of the promised Redeemer, Jesus Christ. A consideration of the New Testament's teaching about them will help us understand their place in redemptive history.

As Isaac and Jacob came to the end of their lives, they pronounced blessings over their children. In Genesis 27:27–29, Isaac pronounced a divine blessing on Jacob with language reminiscent of the language of the blessing God proclaimed to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). Jacob, in turn, pronounced divine blessings on each of his grandsons (Genesis 48) and sons (Genesis 49:1–28). The dying blessings of Isaac and Jacob find their way into the pages of the New Testament, when the writer of Hebrews explains: “*By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff*” (Hebrews 11:20–21). The writer of Hebrews sees in the patriarchal blessings an act of faith.



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What is the Patriarchal Blessing? *Continued from Page 7*

Every act of faith is built on the previous word and promises of God. Isaac and Jacob were pronouncing covenant blessings in light of the previous promises God made to Abraham. Jacob's blessing his sons and the sons of Joseph "by faith" is particularly instructive. Here, at the end of a difficult and challenging life, Jacob continues to cling to the covenant promises of God. As John Owen explained, "*Notwithstanding all the trials and conflicts which he had met withal, with the weaknesses and disconsolations of old age, he abode firm in faith.*" What enabled Jacob to hold on to the promises despite the trials and tribulations he experienced throughout his life was his expectation of God's fulfillment of the promises He gave to Abraham.

The gospel is the foundation of the patriarchal blessings. Isaac and Jacob believed the promises of God regarding the coming Redeemer and His redemptive blessings when they pronounced their blessings on their children. There would be no way to make sense of these patriarchal blessings if we detached them from the person and saving work of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Jesus pronounced the ultimate patriarchal blessing on His disciples as He went to lay down His life for His people. In his *Notes on Scripture*, Jonathan Edwards tied the dying blessings of Isaac and Jacob to Christ's promise to send the Holy Spirit to His people as He also approached His death. Edwards wrote:

Isaac's and Jacob's blessing their children before their death, and, as it were, making over to them their future inheritance, may probably be typical of our receiving the blessings of the Covenant of Grace from Christ, as by His last will and testament, the final [administration of the] Covenant of Grace represented as His testament. Christ in the 14th, 15th and 16th chapters of John, does as it were make His will, and conveys to His people their inheritance before His death, [in] particular the Comforter, or the Holy Spirit, which is the sum of the purchased inheritance.

Scripture teaches that Jesus has fulfilled all the covenant promises by His death and resurrection (2 Corinthians 1:20). He has secured the everlasting inheritance promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 5:5; Romans 4:13). The Apostle Paul makes clear that believers are co-heirs with Abraham on account of the finished work of Christ (Galatians 3:8, 9, 14, 29). Jesus secured the new heavens and new earth for those who would believe in Him (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:5). Christ purchased the Holy Spirit for His people when He hung on the cross. The Spirit is everywhere called "*the promise*" in the Bible (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:33, 39; Galatians 3:14; Ephesians 1:13; 3:6), since Christ promised to send Him to His people as the guarantee of their inheritance (Ephesians 1:11-14). Accordingly, each and every true believer has been blessed "*with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*" in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). There is no greater or more personally meaningful blessing than that which Christ has already bestowed on His people. May God give us the grace to meditate on that blessing continually and live joyfully in light of it all the days of our lives. ~ **Reverend Nicholas Batzig** - Senior pastor of Church Creek PCA in Charleston, S.C., and an associate editor for *Ligonier Ministries*



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If you have a September birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error or you do not want to be published in this newsletter, please e-mail Walt at gwlcf10415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner September 2022

Birthdays

Ben P. (3)

Zachary A. (9)

Rhydian H. (12)

Jonathan D. (15)

Ruth T. (23)

Anniversaries

None to Report

What is the difference between true repentance and a mere apology?

Genuine repentance always involves a confession of wrongdoing and a willingness to make things right. An apology often takes the form of an excuse.

The word apology comes from the Greek apologia, which literally means “a speech in defense of.” Apologies are often nothing more than self-defense: “*I’m sorry if you took offense, but . . .*” Genuine repentance is properly expressed in an admission of wrongdoing and a plea for forgiveness: “*It was unloving of me to say that. Will you forgive me?*”

Be wary of using merely apologetic language in place of genuine repentance.



***West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership***

The West Suffolk Epistle is a monthly publication of West Suffolk Baptist Church.

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