

*Our Old
Sin Nature
Is Dead*

I WAS TEACHING ON THE SUBJECT of our new identity in Christ when Dirk began to squirm in his seat and laugh out loud. He was seated about five rows from the front. I tried to ignore him and keep on teaching, but he became more and more expressive and vocal about what he was feeling. Finally, I walked over to the side of the platform near where he was seated and said, "You look like you're having a good time. What's going on with you?"

"I just realized something," he answered. "I was an alcoholic *in another life!*" Immediately I knew what he meant. Dirk had just realized the truth that when we enter the land of God's grace, we receive a brand-new identity and leave the old one behind. He had been an alcoholic before he met Christ, but at salvation his old identity had been cut away and he had received a brand-new identity.

It was the first day in the new land when the Lord spoke to Joshua and said, "Make for yourself flint knives and circumcise again the sons of Israel the second time" (Joshua 5:2). It had been 40 years since any man in Israel had been circumcised. This was a serious matter, considering the meaning that circumcision always had among the Jewish people. Circumcision had been the sign of God's covenant with His people. He had first spoken of circumcision and His covenant to Abraham when He said, "You shall be

circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you" (Genesis 17:11). A circumcised Jew was a Jew who acknowledged faith in his covenant God. In the New Testament, Israel is sometimes referred to as those "of the circumcision." From the time of God's command to Abraham, the men of Israel had always been circumcised. Yet the whole time that Israel had wandered in the wilderness, none of the men had been circumcised. They were still God's covenant people, but they hadn't been acting like who they were.

Knowing Who We Used to Be

Before a person is a Christian, he has one nature. It is the sin nature, which he inherited by being in the family of Adam. When Adam sinned in the garden of Eden, he died to God and suddenly found that it was his nature to sin. In an instant, all of mankind became dead to God because of the choice made by Adam. "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). We were all born spiritually dead because when Adam died spiritually in the garden, we were *in* him. Consequently, whatever was true of him became true of us. "By the transgression of the one the many died" (Romans 5:15). Every person born into this world has a sin nature because we are born into the family of Adam.

Ephesians 2:3 says that before we became Christians, we "lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and *were by nature* children of wrath, even as the rest" (emphasis added). A man flatters himself who believes that before he becomes a Christian he isn't all *that* bad. In reality, however, his very nature is an offense to God. The Bible teaches that until one is born again he is ungodly (Romans 5:6), a sinner

(Romans 5:8,19), an enemy of God (Romans 5:10), spiritually dead (Romans 5:12), and condemned (Romans 5:18). Before salvation, every person “walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). An unbeliever who believes he is good errs by comparing himself with other people instead of seeing the perfectly righteous character of God. If we compare rotting corpses, it makes little difference whether the body has been dead for a week or a month. The relevant fact is that the man is *dead*. All unbelievers are spiritually dead and fall short of God’s standard of righteousness (see Romans 3:23). It is a person’s very *nature* to sin when he comes into this world. Nobody has to be taught how to sin. The Bible teaches that the wicked go astray from the womb. They are born speaking lies (see Psalm 58:3).

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I remember the first time I ever saw this truth illustrated in a way that makes it evident that we are all born with a sin nature. It was about six weeks after we brought our first-born child home from the hospital. We were playing with him in the living room and he was in a wonderful mood. He laughed and smiled, obviously enjoying his parents’ attention. After a while, it was time to put him to bed. “What do you think about letting him sleep in the crib in his own room tonight?” Melanie asked me. Until now, he had always slept in our bedroom with us.

"I think it might be a good idea," I answered. So we both went into his bedroom and Melanie gently laid him down in the baby bed. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, then I did the same. He softly cooed and smiled at us as we turned to leave the room. *What an angel!* I was thinking.

We both went back into the living room and had just sat down on the couch when we heard a bloodcurdling scream come from his room. *Oh, no!* I thought. *He must have pulled himself up and fallen out of the bed!* Melanie and I jumped to our feet. It was obvious—our precious little six-week-old boy was in serious trouble. *Maybe he has his head caught between the bars of the bed and is choking!* I agonized as we rushed to his room. *I hope he's not bleeding!*

As we burst into the room, we both rushed over to his bed and looked down at him. He instantly stopped crying, looked up at us, smiled, and with a gentle voice, said, "Ah-h-h-h." "He just wants to be picked up," Melanie said.

"What a little liar!" I laughed. "He screamed like he was hurt just so we would run in here and pick him up."

You might argue that a six-week-old baby couldn't devise such a sinister strategy, and I agree. I don't seriously believe that he sinned that day. I'm simply making a point: Nobody has to be taught to do wrong. We have reared four children, and they each mastered the skill of lying at one time or another. I never taught them that. Even though I jokingly told their mother that they took after her side of the family, in reality, it was an intrinsic ability they received from Adam (through me). Just like me, my children were born knowing how to sin because they were born with a sin nature.

Man's Greatest Need Is Not to Stop Sinning

The citizens of this earth sin because it is their nature to do so. Only those whose "citizenship is in heaven" have the ability to

consistently say no to sin. Many well-meaning Christians in the modern church seem to have embraced the goal to curb sin on planet earth, an objective akin to trying to mop up the incoming tide on the beach. If all Christians could band together and force everybody else to stop sinning and begin to live by Judeo-Christian values, what spiritual difference would it make? From an eternal perspective, it would make absolutely none. People would still have the same problem. They would be left *in Adam* and therefore still be sinners.

Watchman Nee once asked a class of children, "Who is a sinner?" and their immediate reply was, "One who sins." He responded,

Yes, one who sins is a sinner, but the fact that he sins is merely the evidence that he is already a sinner; it is not the cause. One who sins is a sinner, but it is equally true that one who does not sin, if he is of Adam's race, is a sinner too, and in need of redemption. Do you follow me? There are bad sinners and good sinners, there are moral sinners and there are corrupt sinners, but they are all alike sinners.¹

Were it possible to stop a person from sinning, his moral improvement would be inconsequential because he would still be a sinner. Consider Dirk, who was addicted to alcohol before he became a believer. What if a well-meaning Christian had made it his project to see Dirk freed from addiction to alcohol? There are many methods that could have been used to accomplish the goal. Some of them might even have been successful, but where would that have left Dirk? If the only thing accomplished was that he lived in freedom from his addiction, Dirk would have still had the same basic problem. His problem wasn't that he was addicted to alcohol; that was only a symptom. His problem was that he was

spiritually dead. He was a child of Adam, ruled by a sin nature that opposed God at every point.

What Dirk needed wasn't new behavior. He needed the new birth! He needed to have his old sin nature, which loved to be drunk, be forever removed from him. Dirk needed far more than rehabilitation; he needed resurrection. He didn't need to learn how to *deny* his desire to get drunk, but instead needed to be *delivered* from the desire to get drunk. He needed a *new identity*. That kind of transaction would require a miracle, but miracles are no problem for God.

The Circumcision of Our Old Nature

God's covenant sign under the old covenant of Law was circumcision. Why would He choose such a thing as a sign of the covenant He has with His people? It is because of what it depicts. He wanted the circumcision of Israel's men to be an object lesson pointing toward what would happen to His children under the new covenant of grace. Physical circumcision is the cutting away of a piece of skin on a man's body at the place from which life originates, and by which his gender (part of his identity) is identified. When the skin is cut away, it never grows back.

The apostle Paul points out that in this day of grace we have been circumcised "with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11). At salvation, God reached down and cut away from you the source of your old life. That source was the sin nature with which you were born because you inherited it from Adam. When you became a Christian, God removed it from you and it will never grow back.

The Jews on the banks of the Jordan used flint knives to circumcise their males, but God's instrument for our spiritual

circumcision was the cross. The cross is the focal point of the Christian faith because every good thing that God has done for us and in us originates at the cross. At the cross God placed us into Jesus Christ and the source of our old life died. The old sin nature we had before becoming Christians was cut away forever. This is an objective truth we must embrace if we are to enjoy living in God's grace. The old person we were is dead!

Consider the following verses, noting the emphatic teaching that our old nature died:

Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin (Romans 6:6).

Our old man is the old Adamic nature that characterizes everybody who is born into this world. This old sin nature was crucified so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.

For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3).

What died? It was our old sin nature, who we used to be. If you struggle with this fact, then the question must be addressed: "If it wasn't our old sin nature that died, what *did* die?" It wasn't our body or our soul. It was the sin-filled spirit that Paul calls "our old man." Our sin nature is dead.

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).

Andrew Murray remarks on this verse:

How blessed must be the experience of such a union with the Lord Jesus! To be able to look upon His death as

mine, just as really as it was His—upon His perfect obedience to God, His victory over sin, and complete deliverance from its power, as mine; and to realize that the power of that death does by faith work daily with a Divine energy in mortifying the flesh, and renewing the whole life into the perfect conformity to the resurrection life of Jesus!²

How wonderful it is to know that the old person we were before salvation died with Christ! The Bible repeatedly asserts this truth (see Romans 6:2-3,7-8,11; 7:6; Galatians 2:19; Colossians 2:20; 2 Timothy 2:11). I offer an abundance of verses because it is important that you be convinced of the death of your old sin nature. If the thought of your old sin nature being dead is contradictory to your feelings, your understanding of your own experiences, or the church tradition in which you may have learned otherwise, I challenge you to *examine the Bible* and allow Scripture to be your final authority. Choose to believe what God says regardless of what you may be inclined to think or feel.

It Takes Time to Heal After Circumcision

Although our old nature has been cut away, that doesn't mean that all the residual effect of our old life is instantly gone. After the Jews entered Canaan and were circumcised, it took time for them to heal. The Bible doesn't say how long that time was, but remember that they were circumcised with a sharp *rock* (we're talking serious commitment here!). We can be certain that healing didn't happen overnight.

Don't assume that because your old nature has been put to death everything that fueled your lifestyle in the wilderness will instantly disappear. Although your spirit is now filled with the life of Jesus Christ, the *soul* must be gradually renewed, and that

takes time. The soul is our personality, consisting of our mind, will, and emotions. Part of the ongoing sanctification process that the Holy Spirit does in our lives is to bring healing to our damaged emotions and to renew our minds to the truth of God's Word. Living in the land of God's grace is not a lifestyle of sinless perfection; rather, it is a place in which God can gradually bring about the healing that we may need in our feelings and beliefs.

"Why don't I have the confidence I need to really influence other people's lives for Christ?" Annette had been to my office for counsel many times over the past few months. I knew her history of abuse as a child, both mentally and sexually. She had been molested by both her uncle and her next-door neighbor. When she told her mother about the neighbor, her mom's response was, "Just stay away from him." Concerning her dad's brother, her mother's answer was, "Your dad would kill him if he found out what he did, so don't mention this. Just don't get too close to your uncle." So Annette did exactly what her mother told her to do—she withdrew. Except she didn't withdraw from only her uncle and her neighbor; she pretty much withdrew from everybody. She learned to be an introverted child whose basic desire was to be invisible to those around her.

In her thirties, Annette came to understand her identity in Christ. She made the move into the new land, but she still struggled with *feelings* of insecurity. Her mind knew better, but her feelings told her that she would be hurt if she became too close to people. In the weeks that followed, I showed Annette what the Bible says about walking in faith. I explained that faith is simply a confidence in God and that her need wasn't to have greater *self*-confidence, but to express greater confidence in Christ and His ability to express His life through her. "You mean that I should simply *act* like it's not me who is interacting with other people, but that it is *Jesus* who is relating to them?" she asked one day. "That's

a pretty good way to describe it," I answered. "You simply need to trust Him to be your Confidence in every situation."

Some time after that I saw Annette at church one day. She walked over to me smiling, leaned over, and whispered, "I had to go to a social function for my husband's company last night. I *felt* nervous, but you should have seen Jesus there. He did a good job!" I understood. Annette is choosing to let Jesus *be* Jesus in her and she is waiting for her feelings to change in His time. Feelings may not change instantly when we enter the land, but we often find

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ourselves rising above our ability and living out of a Life-Source greater than ourselves. There *is* healing when we come into the promised land. It just doesn't always happen immediately. You can believe that your old nature is dead and gone and *act* in faith, knowing that God will guide you continually and will gradually bring healing to your feelings and thought processes.

Freedom from Our Past

All Christians know that when we enter into Jesus Christ we receive a new future. Our eternal destination becomes heaven, not because of what we do or don't do, but because we are now *in Christ*. Yet what many believers don't know is that we also have a new past. Because we are a new creature in Him (see 2 Corinthians

5:17), His past becomes our past. The person who was in Adam is dead. We are not simply changed at salvation; we are made somebody *new*. To say that one becomes a different person when he becomes a Christian doesn't mean that he has been simply changed. It means that his old life has been *exchanged* for a new one—the very Life of Jesus Christ Himself!

One of the great benefits Israel enjoyed when she entered Canaan was having the shame of her past removed. "Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.' So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day" (Joshua 5:9). Nothing so handicaps a man in his walk with God as trying to drag around an old shameful identity. Who you *were* and who you *are* have no connection anymore. In Jesus Christ, we don't only have a new future, we have a new *past*! The person you are now has been "in Him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). The person you *were* is dead. The new you has a past that is blameless and spotless.

Consider Dirk, who laughed out loud and said, "I just realized something. I was an alcoholic *in another life*." He didn't mean that he had been reincarnated. Dirk was understanding for the first time that while he had been an alcoholic before he became a Christian, that man is dead now. In his new life in Christ, he has a new identity. His past life has been totally removed from him. Paul describes this miraculous transaction in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were

washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God (emphasis added).

Drunkards (or alcoholics) don't go to heaven. But Dirk is no longer an alcoholic. He has been washed, sanctified, and justified! Dirk the drunkard is dead. Can a saved man *act* like an alcoholic? Of course. Yet it is important to know that who we are and how we act don't always coincide. Melanie sometimes tells me when I am sick that I'm a big baby, but it's not true. I have a birth certificate to prove it. Actions don't determine our identity—birth does.

When we entered into Jesus Christ, the shame of our old life was rolled away. We may still behave in certain wrong ways when we try to get our needs met apart from Christ; these self-sufficient techniques are called *flesh*. They aren't who we are, but only how we function when we are not trusting the indwelling Christ to meet our needs. A man who was an alcoholic before he became a Christian may still have a propensity toward physical and psychological addiction to alcohol, but that has nothing to do with his identity. Rather, it has everything to do with his *flesh*.

Lies That Bind

It would be totally inaccurate for Dirk to introduce himself by saying, "Hi, I'm Dirk and I'm an alcoholic. It's been five years and four months since I had my last drink." Does that sound like *freedom* to you? In no way do I intend to minimize the seriousness of a person's addiction to alcohol, but in God's grace-land, we have a new freedom from the shame of our past. I'm grateful for organizations that help patch people back together when they're coming apart, but Jesus Christ can do more than patch people back together. Some people who used to be addicted to *drinking* alcohol have now become addicted to *talking about* alcohol in

meetings with others who have had similar struggles. Their lives still seem to revolve around alcohol, even though they don't drink it anymore. Does this sound like the best answer to you? A better option is to appropriate by faith the new identity that Christ gave you and allow Him to completely roll away the shame of the past!

My friend Mike Quarles became addicted to alcohol after he served as a pastor for a number of years. He found freedom only through understanding his identity in Christ. In his book *Freedom from Addiction*, he lists 30 different ways he tried to overcome his bondage to alcohol, including Christian counselors, psychiatrists, accountability groups, treatment centers, willpower, and many other sincere efforts.³ It was only when Mike came to understand that his old identity had died at salvation and that he had a brand-new identity in Christ that he experienced the freedom that had been his all along. He writes of that moment when he *knew* his true identity:

At that moment the lights came on and I understood the truth. I knew I had died with Christ. The old sin-loving sinner had died and was no more. For many years I believed I was a sinner and acted like it. Now I knew that I was dead to sin whether I acted like it, felt like it, looked like it or anyone else believed it because God said I was. I also knew the truth that I was free, "because anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:7 NIV).

Jesus said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32 NIV). I had believed I was a hopeless, helpless alcoholic. For years I lived in bondage, but less than 24 hours away from being drunk, I knew without any doubt that I, Mike Quarles, was a child of God who was "in Christ." I had died with Christ, and was dead to sin and had been freed from sin. At last, I was free. Praise God I was free at last!⁴

I have genuine compassion for those whose addiction is alcohol because I too have experienced addictions of different sorts. While alcohol hasn't been my particular area of vulnerability, I do know what it is like to struggle in other areas. I'm not pleased to acknowledge that I sometimes don't act like who I know I am. I know what it is to face temptation and lose the battle at times. Yet I know my flesh patterns are not who I am. Our fleshly behavior is inconsistent with our true identity because our old man is dead and the shame of our past is forever gone.

Dirk and Mike can never be alcoholics again. According to 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, alcoholics don't go to heaven. These men have been washed, sanctified, and justified. Could they *act* like alcoholics again if they made that choice? Of course. However, that wouldn't change their true identity. They would only be Christians *acting* like alcoholics.

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Sometimes it seems that the modern church is particularly hard on those who have abused alcohol. If we are going to insist that they identify themselves by their own particular sin, why don't we be fair about it and make *everybody* acknowledge their own brand of flesh when introducing themselves? Imagine this scene next Sunday at church: "Hi, I'm Sue and I'm a gossip. It's been three days since I've talked about anybody at church." "Hi, I'm Jim and I'm a lust-filled man. It was last Sunday when I last had sexual fantasies about any of the ladies here." That would really be

horrible, wouldn't it? Then why single out the sin of alcohol abuse? Whether your past includes alcohol, gossip, lust, or anything else you can name, it has been rolled away by the cross! In the new land, you are free from the shame and power of your past. It is still possible to lapse into sins that characterized your life then, but it's not who you are today. You no longer live there.

What a relief it must have been for Israel to hear that the reproach of the past was gone. The sins of murmuring, unbelief, idolatry, disobedience, rebellion—all of it was gone! Now the people could move forward to possess the land with a clear conscience. Nobody can live in consistent victory without a clear conscience. But the God of the old and new covenants is just that kind of God. He will free us from the guilt of our past, give us a brand-new identity, and then lead us forward into victory. As Israel was soon to discover, the way to victory certainly didn't happen the way any man would have planned it.



Dear Father,

Thank You that by the cross You have forever put away my past life. I praise You that my new identity isn't determined by what I do or have done in the past. Teach me how to move forward in grace, trusting You to bring healing to my life wherever it is needed. I accept by faith that You have rolled away the shame of my past. I will accept that truth by faith even during the times that I don't feel it. Thank You, Father.

G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions

1. Read Joshua 5. Why was it important for the Jewish men to be circumcised once they had entered Canaan? Read Colossians 2:11. Explain what Paul meant when he said that Christians are circumcised by God.
2. Read Romans 6:1-6. Paraphrase the passage in your own words. What part of us died with Jesus on the cross? Does a Christian still have a sin nature?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Can a Christian be an adulterer? A homosexual? A drunkard? Do any of these inherit the kingdom of God? Can a Christian behave like one of these? What would you tell a person who said his dad was a Christian but died as an alcoholic?
4. List three common lies that bind the average Christian today.
5. Find three verses not mentioned in this chapter that indicate that the old sin nature has died.