

THE HOLY SPIRIT

EXPERIENTIAL CHRISTIANITY

Lesson 1

THE GOAL

The goal and desire of every true Christian is to experience Christ and become more Christ-like in his or her life. The Apostle Paul said, *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philip. 2:10-11)*. Paul wanted to be constantly knowing, continually knowing, repeatedly knowing Jesus Christ in an intimate, spiritual and experiential way.

THE PROBLEM

When we talk about Christian living, we are moving into the realm of subjective experience. There seems to be two extremes. Christians are afraid of experience or they go too far and experience things not allowed by Scripture.

There are three negative ways to approach Christian experience. The **first** is to say, “If I have not experienced something, it must not be true.” This view plays down experience, and the one making this claim is saying that his experience is complete. There is no room for any more experience. This view is pure pride. In essence, it claims that one has arrived, and new experiences with Christ are not necessary. Surely, this view might play down progressive sanctification.

The **second** is to say, “I have experienced something. Therefore, it must be true.” The view says that all experience is valid with little or no desire to test the validity of the experience. This view plays down knowledge as a key to test one’s experience. It is possible to have many religious experiences before and after conversion to Christ that have no biblical basis. A person may have psychological and religious experiences that are not Christian experiences because there is no validity for them in the Bible. They are real experiences but not necessarily Christian experiences.

The **third** is to say, “I have experienced something and have been dissatisfied with the experience so I rejected it as untrue.” Just because someone has a bad experience with experience does not mean that particular experience is not true.

All Christians should be committed without reservation to the *Bible as the only rule of faith and practice*. The correct way for a Christian to approach experience is to say, “If the Bible speaks about an experience, it is true whether I have experienced it or not.” Yet, the Bible also becomes the only criterion to determine whether that experience has validity. Without the Bible to test all experience, the Christian is thrown out into a sea of subjectivity, where everybody is doing that which is right in their own eyes.

Those who are prone to be more experienced oriented might say, “What about experiences not specifically mentioned in the Bible like slaying in the Spirit, laughing in the Spirit, shaking in the Holy Spirit, hot hands and gold teeth fillings?” I personally cannot classify any of these as Christian experiences because they are not specifically stated in the Bible. However, I cannot deny that people are having or claiming to have these experiences. I put them in the category as psychological or religious experiences. Jonathan Edwards, making notes on the so called supernatural phenomena in the Great Awakening in America, said in summary that if an experience makes one more Christ-like than do not reject it. If, however, it does not, then reject it as from an alien source. If one’s experience makes him or her more experience oriented (a thrill seeker), and want more and more experiences, even by manipulation and fraud, then this is an invitation to spiritual shipwreck. *God wants our emotions but abhors emotionalism.*

The only safeguard against emotional extremism is a proper knowledge of the Bible. ***“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).*** The Greek word for “knowledge” is *ginosko* and it means “experiential knowledge.” It is knowledge for sure, but it is knowledge that is to be played out in everyday experience. Knowledge gives a foundation whereby we can build a superstructure for daily Christ-centered living. *It is impossible to live by truth we do not know.*

THE SUPREME EXPERIENCE

The Old Testament

The supreme experienced according to the Old Testament is to love God. ***“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5).*** The Pharisees asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment, ***“Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”***

Old Testament saints were to love God with all their hearts. The heart is the seat of one’s emotions (sensibility). The soul is our inner being where choices are made (volition). The mind is the seat of all our thinking processes (intellect). The whole personality of a man or woman is to love God, obey God and think about God with all the strength that is in them.

The highest and greatest experience is to love God. We are not just to know about God but to know God personally, vitally, intimately and experientially without reservation. The problem is that men are creatures of extremes. They either love God without knowledge or they have a lot of knowledge but not much love. The key word is *balance*.

Jesus Christ is Jehovah of the Old Testament (Matt. 3:3 cf. Isa. 40:3; /Acts 2:21 cf. Joel 2:32; Luke 1:76 cf. Mal. 3:1; Eph. 4:8 cf. Psa. 68:18; Philip. 2:10-11 cf. Isa. 45:22-25).

New Testament

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul said, ***“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection” (Philip. 3:10-11).*** He wanted to experientially know (*ginosko*) Christ. He wanted to know experientially everything there was to know about His Saviorship, Lordship and Kingship.

Paul also wanted to experientially know about Christ’s resurrection power, and he wanted all Christians to experience this power. ***“I pray . . . that your may know . . . his incomparable great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead . . . “ (Eph. 1:17-20). “For this reason I kneel before the Father . . . I pray that you, . . . may have power, together with all the saints, . . . and to know this love that surpasses knowledge . . . Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, . . .” (Eph. 3:14-20).***

Paul also longed to enter into the sufferings of Jesus Christ is an experiential way. Most likely, that comes through sharing the death and resurrection with those who are unbelievers. He also wanted to experientially be conformed to Christ’s death, which probably meant he wanted to die to self and sin and live more for Christ and righteousness.

The point is crystal clear. Paul did not want to talk about or philosophize as to how to know Christ. He wanted to know Christ with his total being. He wanted to experience Christ and to keep on experiencing Him. The whole of Paul’s life could be summed up in one verse, ***“For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philip. 1:21).***

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HEART

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).

“Create in me a pure heart, O God . . .” (Psa. 51:10)

“Give me an undivided heart” (Psa. 86:11)

“Search me, O God, and know my heart . . .” (Psa. 139:23)

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart . . .” (Prov. 3:5-6)

“My son, give me your heart . . .” (Prov. 23:26)

“Keep your heart on the right path” (Prov. 23:19-20)

“THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM IS THE PROBLEM OF THE HEART”

