

The Surrender of Self

by Joe Crews

An Amazing Fact!

Houdini, born Erich Weiss on March 24, 1874, is perhaps America's most famous magician and escape artist. While visiting a psychiatrist friend in Nova Scotia in 1896, Houdini saw his first strait jacket. Instead of shock, he was inspired to create an act around escaping from it. And Houdini didn't just escape from a strait jacket-he did it hanging upside down from his ankles, suspended yards above the ground.

Houdini then expanded his act to escape not only from any handcuffs offered, but also from most any location suggested. Houdini escaped from jail cells, handcuffed bridge jumps, padlocked crates thrown into rivers, locked canvas mailbags-even a giant paper bag, without making a single tear in it. Possibly his most memorable escapes were the stage illusions he made famous, including the Water Torture Cell, the Milk Can Escape, and Buried Alive.

Even though Houdini learned to escape from the most secure physical restraints by slight of hand and a great deal of persistence, the bondage of sin is impossible to break without a complete surrender of one's life to the will of God.

The Surrender of Self

I think it has probably already been revealed to most of us that self is the greatest enemy we face. Once we have settled it with that old man of the flesh who seeks to rule over us, all the other victories will come in their course.

God has given every one of us a powerful personal weapon to use in combating the self-nature. The will is our only natural reserve weapon, and absolutely everything depends on the right action of this resource. The ultimate sin in the eyes of God, the final factor that will cause a soul to be lost, is to deliberately say "no" to the will of God. We become whatever we choose to be. We are not what we feel, or what we might do or say in a single impulsive moment of our life. We cannot always control our emotions, but we can control our will.

Feelings have nothing to do with the truth of God. It is not your feelings, your emotions, that make you a child of God, but the doing of God's will. Perhaps you had a headache or arthritis pain when you woke up this morning, but does that change the fact that God loves you? Does it alter the truth that the seventh day is the Sabbath? Whether you feel good or bad, the truth remains exactly the same.

Some people can feel wonderful during an evangelistic crusade or a special revival weekend, but when the meetings are finished, their faith plummets to rock bottom. It is a yo-yo effect with everything tied to emotions generated by circumstances.

We must recognize the fact that our will and God's will, at some point, must come into violent collision. Either we let Him have His way or we choose our own course. And when it happens, most people are not willing to admit the true cause behind the raging conflict. They do not see the battle as primarily linked to the self-nature.

In evangelism I have listened to hundreds of "reasons" for not going all the way with Christ. They tell me it is because of Sabbath work, or doubts about the Bible, or opposition of relatives. But none of those things are the true reasons. It goes much deeper than the words they are uttering. There is a basic nature problem behind their lack of commitment. They talk about twigs and leaves when the real problem is the roots. The truth is that God wants something that self is not willing to give up. They love something more than they love God.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus made that strange statement in Matthew 16:24, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me"? Why didn't the Master finish the sentence by spelling out the thing to be denied? "Let him deny himself"-what? Drugs, alcohol, tobacco, Sabbath-breaking? No. Just deny himself, period. Jesus knew that self was behind every angry battle against the truth. Once that victory is gained, all other victories will be won also.

Multitudes are outside the will of God and outside the church because they are not willing to give up something that they love more than they love God. Thousands are in the church and are perfectly miserable because something in their life has been fighting the will of God for years. To be a true Christian requires surrender above everything else.

Is Trying the Answer?

Now let's come back to the question of your sin and mine. We have to admit that we fight an enemy who is stronger than we are. In the weakness of the flesh we find ourselves bound in mind and body by the superior strength of our spiritual enemy. We resolutely struggle to extricate ourselves from the bondage, but the harder we try the deeper we sink into the mire. At last, when we are totally exhausted from the effort, a well-meaning friend comes by and says, "I know what the problem is. You need to try harder."

If that is the only answer we have to the sin problem, we should stop sending missionaries to India. I've never seen anyone try harder to be saved than the Hindus. I've watched the wretched penitents prostrating in the hot dust, painfully measuring their length, mile after mile, as they inch toward some sacred river rendezvous. There they will dip under the filthy water, look up at the blazing sun, and pray-then repeat the process again, and again, and again.

Millionaire businessmen will give away all their wealth, take a beggar's bowl, and spend the rest of their lives feeding on scraps of shared food-all in an effort to earn salvation. Never have I seen a Christian try as hard to be saved as a Hindu does. Yet, I have never met a single Hindu seeker who had found any assurance or peace of mind-not even among the Brahmin brotherhood of the highest caste.

Do you know why "trying" will not break the chain of sin? Because sinful propensities are deeply embedded in the very nature of every baby born into the world. We are brought into this life with inherent weaknesses which predispose us toward disobedience. Furthermore, we have all yielded to those propensities. Jesus, born with the same fallen nature, is the only One who never gave way to those weaknesses. He lived a totally sanctified life of obedience.

We do not need instruction in theology to acquaint us with the facts about our fallen nature. All of us have struggled with memories of failure and compromise. We have desperately tried to blot out scenes of unfaithfulness from our minds, but every such effort has ended in utter defeat.

I heard of a holy man in India who traveled from village to village laying claim to special creative power. As a result of his Himalayan pilgrimage, this sadhu professed to hold the secret for making gold. He would fill a large caldron with water and then stir the contents vigorously while uttering his sacred incantations. But in the process of stirring he also slyly slipped some gold nuggets into the water without being detected.

The head man of one village wanted to buy the secret for making gold and the holy man agreed to sell it for 500 rupees. After explaining the stirring and the prayers to be repeated the priest took his 500 rupees and started to leave. Then he turned back and gave a final word of warning, "When you are stirring the water and uttering the prayers you must never once think of the red-faced monkey, or the gold will not come!"

As you can imagine the head man never could make the formula work because every single time he stirred the water, there was the red-faced monkey sitting at the edge of his mind, grinning at him.

We have absolutely no natural ability to keep the thoughts and imagination under control for the simple reason that they are rooted in our sinful natures. Only when the mind has been regenerated through the process of conversion can the individual subjugate the lower, physical powers and bring them under the effective control of the Holy Spirit. Only in this way may the very intents of the heart be sanctified and brought into harmony with Christ. Without the transforming grace of the new birth, "the carnal mind ... is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

For three years I studied the language in India under the tutelage of a Hindu priest who came to my house daily on his bicycle. This gave me the opportunity to ask questions about various aspects of Hindu worship. Only after many months of classroom camaraderie did I feel clear in asking my teacher about one puzzling feature of his ancestral religion. "Why," I asked, "did most all the temples have obscene carvings all over the front of the buildings?"

My pundit seemed genuinely shocked by the question and vociferously denied that any such carvings existed. Whereupon I invited him to walk down the street a block or two where a new temple was being constructed. I had watched the builders placing the obscenities by the front entrance door, so the teacher could not deny they were there. But once again he professed surprise and stated categorically that he had never seen anything like it before. He would find out the reason for it and tell me the next day.

On the following afternoon as he was mounting his bicycle to leave, I asked him about the carvings again. "Oh yes," he said, "I found out why they put them on the front of temples. You see, when the people go in to worship the gods they are not supposed to think of those evil things, so we place the carvings to remind them not to think of those things while worshipping inside."

I chuckled at his novel explanation, realizing that none of us need reminding about the intrusion of such thoughts. Without the restraining power of God they are ever with us. What we need is the panacea of divine grace to subdue and conquer them. The renewed mind holds the answer to both the inside and outside factors which lead to transgression.

Controlling the Inner Spirit

Have you noticed, though, that it is always easier to deal with external actions than with internal dispositions? Well-disciplined people can force themselves to act correctly on the outside, even when the inward desires are at war with the outward conduct. The Bible teaches that this conflict must cease between how we think and how we act. A true Christian will be the same in both mind and body.

All of us have seen drivers dutifully slow down to fifteen miles per hour through school zones. They appear submissive and law-abiding as they creep along in front of the uniformed traffic patrol officer. Yet those drivers are usually seething with internal anger and rebellion because of missing an appointment. Self is behind that angry battle, and the stubborn will has simply not yielded to the idea of obedience. Here is where the desperate need lies for those who claim to be in the family of God. Almost anyone with minimum acting skills can force conformity to the rules (especially if they think someone is watching) but almost no one can force himself to be sweet about it. We can try until our dying breath and we will never be able to alter the unconverted disposition by dint of determination. Such a major shift requires the creation of new attitudes and thought patterns.

Many are convinced that they are Christians just because they act in a certain way and conform to certain biblical rules and principles. In other words, their lifestyle and behavior identifies them as not of this world. Or does it? Can we always recognize a true child of God by his conduct? Perhaps we can over a period of time, but pretenders are able to deceive most of us for a good while. Eventually the nature behind the good works begins to appear and the charade is seen for what it really is.

Isaiah wrote, "If ye be willing and obedient ye shall eat the good of the land" (Isaiah 1:19). Some people are obedient without being willing, and their fruit is soon exposed as artificial. What does this teach us? It teaches us that two mistakes can be made concerning those who keep God's law carefully. We might wrongly assume they are legalists because they look so seriously upon the slightest disobedience, or we might wrongly assume they are true Christians just because they show zeal for conforming to the law.

Judging the Outward Actions

No one can read the motives of another. Therefore, it is a dangerous, judgmental attitude to deprecate the apparent caring concern that a fellow Christian has for keeping the commandments. If his works indeed are based upon principles of self-effort and do-it-yourself salvation, the truth will be exposed soon enough. But if he has a genuine love relationship with Christ which constrains him to be meticulous in obedience, then he deserves commendation instead of criticism.

So we must conclude that it is a fatal delusion to depend upon trying harder and struggling longer to get the victory over sin. The secret is trusting instead of trying, and time will only make a young sinner into an old sinner. Finally, we must admit that we are not as strong as our adversary, and as we surrender our dependence upon human strength and effort, God provides the glorious gift of victory.

Jesus said, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). That is a tremendous truth, but we must go far beyond the negativism of this statement and experience the positive reality of Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." The difference between "all things" and "no thing" is Christ.

This does not imply that we sit back in relaxed idleness while God assumes all the responsibility for our deliverance. There is a balance between the possibility and responsibility of overcoming sin. One belongs to God and the other to us. The possibility rests with God and the responsibility rests with us. And as we begin to act against the sin in our life, God provides the power to actually break with the sin.

How far may we go in utilizing that faith method of claiming the victory? John declares that "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). By submitting to that higher power which reaches down from above, the soul is able to bring every thought into captivity to Christ.

How Far Can We Go in Victory?

By yielding our will to the higher powers from above, we can be delivered from the bondage of the flesh. The entire being is made captive to the Spirit of God, and we are able to think His thoughts after Him. Paul declares that we partake of the divine nature and have the mind of Christ. Again and again, the process is described as a surrendering of the will, and a giving up of our own way. "Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God" (Romans 6:13).

Paul further described the surrender process as a crucifixion of the self-nature. He said, "I am crucified with Christ;" and again, "I die daily." This constant subjection of the will is not achieved by any decision or effort which we can manufacture from within ourselves. Self will never make the choice to put itself to death. Only the Holy Spirit can create the desire to escape from the domination of a sin-loving nature. Only He can bring us to the point of being willing to give up every indulgence of that corrupt, fallen nature.

As the mind and will cooperate with the Holy Spirit, a faith-reckoning renders the death blow to the old man of sin. The life opens up to the sweet, triumphant in-filling of a new spiritual power. Little idols disappear as they are dethroned from the heart. There are no more secrets from God, no longer anything to hide or to be ashamed of, no more defeatism as a way of life. Joyfully we put aside the ornaments of self and the world to allow more capacity for the loving character of Christ to be revealed.

Although there are brief superficial pleasures in a life of sin, those indulgences cannot be compared with the delight of following Jesus. Self makes the Christian path seem dark and fearsome; but when self is surrendered and crucified, the narrow road is filled with joy unspeakable.

The Enigma of Miserable Christians

Every time you see an unhappy Christian you are looking at someone who has not surrendered self to the cross of Christ. That inward life of the flesh, that self-nature, has been allowed to survive, and there can be no peace in a divided loyalty. Those who have not submitted to be crucified with Christ still carry their religion like a heavy burden. They remind me of the Hindu processions I observed, again and again, on the crowded streets of India. The priests and devotees staggered along bearing the heavy idol on their shoulders. Occasionally they stopped to rest, and it was an obvious relief to put down their god momentarily to relieve themselves of the burden.

Isaiah described the same thing in his day as he must have watched similar scenes. He wrote, "They lavish gold out of the bag ... and he maketh it a god: they fall down, yea, they worship. They bear him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he standeth; from his place shall he not remove: yea, one shall cry unto him, yet can he not answer, nor save him out of his trouble" (Isaiah 46:6, 7).

How accurately this describes what I observed in India. Their god was so helpless that they had to carry it from place to place. They wearied themselves with the effort to move it to another location. It was a burden which they were relieved to be rid of when they stopped to rest.

What kind of religion is it that must be painfully endured and borne like some miserable weight? I've seen professed Christians with that same kind of experience. They have a religion that seems to do nothing for them but to make them weary and disgruntled.

There is only one explanation for this kind of bizarre situation. It is abnormal in the extreme. Christians should be the happiest people in the world. If they are not, it is because self has not been surrendered and crucified.

Come back now to the text in Isaiah where the prophet described the idol processions of his day. In truth it is not Isaiah speaking but the Lord God Himself. In verse 7 He said, concerning the idol god, "they carry him." Now read verse 4 where God declared to Israel, "And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you."

Which god do you serve today? What kind of religion do you profess? You can only serve God or self. When you unreservedly surrender that spoiled, greedy, indulgent self to be put to death, you may reckon yourself dead to the sins which self promotes. Trying to live a Christian life without dying to self is just as miserable as struggling to carry a pagan god. In fact, when self has not been given up to the death of the cross, it comes between you and the Saviour, becoming a real god. The constant strain of trying to subdue that self-god by human effort can wear out the most determined saint.

What happens then when faith claims the victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil? We are relieved of the strain, because God promises to carry us. "Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57). "And this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5 :4). "I have made, and I will bear, even I will carry, and will deliver you" (Isaiah 46:4).

It is not hard to imagine that Satan's strongest efforts are aimed at the exaltation of self. He can only control the individuals who continue to feed the carnal nature. Perhaps some of the most appealing subtiles in his list would include self-righteousness, self-dependence, self-seeking, self-pleasing, self-will, self-defense, and self-glory.

Because he is the temporary prince of this world, the devil has inspired an avalanche of material which focuses on developing the love of self. There is a sense, of course, in which we need to recognize our value in the sight of God. He counted every one of us as more precious than His own life. But that objective recognition is entirely distinct from the basic self-centeredness of the fallen human race. God can love us in spite of our genetic weaknesses and indulged carnal appetites, but the closer we come to Jesus, the less charmed we should be by our own perverse ways. In fact, as we enter into the converted life through the Holy Spirit, the confidence we placed in the flesh will be wholly shifted to the Saviour. In describing the new birth experience, Paul compared it to spiritual circumcision. "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3).

As we have noted already, the great apostle equated this conversion experience to the crucifixion of self. The truth is that the egocentric nature of every baby, child, and adult is to have his or her own way. This nature must be crucified, and under the mastery of the new spiritual nature, the affections are set upon Jesus. Self is no longer important. The flesh has no strength to control the life or fulfill its own will. The song of the soul now is, "Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Thou art the potter; I am the clay." God grant us this experience.

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