

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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What Comes Next?

by Dan Trygg

“Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk as the nations walk, in the futility of their perception. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated-away from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having become callous (lit., ‘being in pain away from themselves’; stuffing their pain) they gave themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more. ²⁰ But you did not learn-to-experience Christ in this manner, ²¹ if indeed you heard Him and were taught by Him, according as the truth is in Jesus: ²² to take off (put aside) your former way of life, the old person that is being-corrupted by deceitful desires; ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new person, the one according to God created in righteousness and devout-consecration of the truth.”

Ephesians 4:17-24

The message of this passage of scripture could fit many different contexts in life. It could be a good place to begin to follow-up with a new believer, ...or it could a word of admonition for one who has been a Christian for a while, but is in need of some redirection and focus. In fact, this would be a good reminder for any of us, at any time in our spiritual journey. **However, it is important for us to see that the specific context of this passage is as a challenge to us as members of the body of Christ.** The previous section of this letter was all about how we have been called and are to be equipped to serve one another, and help each other heal, grow, find freedom and become matured in our walk with God. This is *not* to be an individual pilgrimage, however. **We are in this together, and we are to help one another grow in every way into Christ**, who is the Source of our spiritual lives, and the One who directs us toward the advance and fulfillment of our service in His body, the church. **The church is not an institution, or an organization. It is a living organism, comprised of individual parts that are designed by God to work together as a team. God has chosen to use us as channels of His grace, ...affirmers of His love, ...supporters of others in their times of weakness and need, ...and soldiers together to advance His kingdom.** The church that is envisioned in the NT is an interactive team of specialists, called together by Christ to strengthen and support one another, and display the love of Christ to a watching world. **In order for the interactive church to function as God has designed it to, we all must be focused and engaged in our pursuit of Jesus and in walking out the new life He is causing to rise up within us.** This is a call to action.

The personal pronoun “you” is plural throughout this passage. This is written to the *group*, to the *team*, to the people called together by Christ to meet and invest in one another. **If we are going to become effective at this, we all need to be involved, committed, purposeful and doing our part.** Paul has dealt with many other groups by this time. He knows what this entails. So, he moves right in to challenge us. “This I say *therefore*, and testify in the Lord...” **What does he say? “Y’all have to stop living like the unbelievers live.”** Why did he feel the need to say that? Because many of them *were* living just as the unbelievers live! Look around. How many of *us* are living as the unbelieving world lives? We are to be *different*. We are called to be “holy ones”, ones who are dedicated to God. We *say* that we are, but how well are we actually carrying that out?

What specifically was Paul thinking about? He said to stop living by the emptiness or futility of our own thinking and self-perception. **Stop living as though the life of God is not available to you.** Stop living by stuffing your inner pain or emptiness, putting it off to the side because you don’t want to deal with it, and running after pleasure as a distraction and diversion. *That* will never satisfy. *That* will never work.

Note that Paul says that the unbelievers are living this way *due to the ignorance that is within them, and the hardness of their hearts.* There are many, many Christians who also suffer from *these same obstacles to experiencing the freedom that God has for them.* They simply *don’t know* what is available to them, or how to go about experiencing that in a practical way. And, their own hearts are just as *insensitive* as the hearts of unbelievers.

The Greek word here for “hardness” of heart is from a medical term that literally referred to a callous, a thick growth of skin produced as a protection against otherwise painful, irritating experiences. We live in a world like that, where **we have been exposed to words, actions and attitudes of people that were painful to our sensitive emotions. We have learned to become desensitized to much of that, in order to survive.** We have thrown up barriers, walls of protection, to keep hurtful people at bay. We have learned to withdraw emotionally, so that people cannot so easily hurt us. **Many of us have even learned to “toughen up” and become hard or unfeeling.** Sadly, often what we did to protect *ourselves* also makes it easier to hurt *others* without concern or empathy.

Then, with great insight, Paul describes the phenomenon that seems to drive so much of our culture today. **The Greek says, “having put pain at a distance, we have given ourselves over to sensuality.”** (The root word that

means to “be in pain” is *algeō*, from which we derive the word “analgesic”. An analgesic is a substance given to “lift the pain” [from *ana*=up and *algeō*=to be in pain.] The word here in Ephesians 4 uses a different prefix, *apo*, which means “away from”, hence *apalgeō* means to “be in pain away from yourself” or “distance the pain” or “stuff the pain”.) **The point is, that you don’t face the pain, or deal with the pain or the inner emptiness. You put it aside and go after pleasure, ...sensuality..., in an attempt to fill the emptiness or medicate the pain** (which is still *there*, ...but is kept somewhat at a distance).

Paul says this is “futile” living. This does not work. It is *obvious* that it is ineffective, because the need for more and more pleasurable experiences to escape the pain is *unending*. This is where the trap of addiction can ensnare a person, ...always trying to escape negative feelings with a temporary pleasure or “rush”. **The inner pain or emptiness is not healed, ...it is merely temporarily covered..., avoided, ...or denied.** But the inner pain continues to drain resources from your mind, emotions, and life energy. **Furthermore, the self-protective callous you create dulls your emotions and feelings, and debilitates your ability to recognize and respond to signals in the world around you that are meant to clarify things, ...to warn of potential danger, or to encourage healthy participation, ...and even can dull your ability to sense the leading and promptings of God.**

Paul goes on to say that you didn’t learn-to-experience Jesus in this way. **To experience Jesus, you have to face your pain, your sin, your emptiness, ...you need to change your perception (repent).** We came to Christ by accepting God’s grace by faith. God provided a solution that did not come from ourselves. It came from Him. All we did was to take His offer to us by trusting Him as our Savior, and yielding our lives to serve Him as our King. We were born from above, and received the Holy Spirit, ...*but it is still possible to live by the futile approaches to life we were following before we came to know Christ.* **Paul is saying that choosing to follow Christ means to put aside that old person we once were, along with those old ways of living we used to operate by, ...to be renewed in our minds, ...and to put on that new self that has been created to be like God, in righteousness and devout-consecration to the truth.**

Here is the radical truth that we can live by: We are no longer alienated-away from the life of God. We have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, ...and the life of the Holy Spirit lives inside of us. **But we have to choose to live in accordance with the life of God within us. That means that we must put off that old identity, that old self, and the habits we lived by. We must learn to live in a different way. We must learn to put on and live as the new creatures we are in Christ, ...as ones born from God, ...living for God, from the life that comes from Him.**

A challenging aspect of that is to learn to put aside the self-protective things we learned to do in order to avoid pain and discomfort. **We must learn to embrace our new God-designed humanity, and learn to acknowledge when we feel pain or inner emptiness. Instead of stuffing our pain, we are to acknowledge what we are feeling, and learn how to handle those emotions in a productive manner.** For some of us, that will mean learning to speak up for ourselves, ...for others, it may mean that we need to slow down and not snap at others in irritation. **We must learn to go to God first, to remember what He has done for us, ...and who we now are in Christ.** The arrows of accusation will bounce off the shield of faith. **We must learn to center ourselves on who we are in Christ, and who Christ is in us. Instead of hardening or callousing our hearts, we are to learn how to open our hearts up to God and to others.** We are to seek more awareness of God’s Presence and working in our lives, ...both *around* us, and *inside* us. **Where we used to fill our minds with noise and distraction, if we want to become more aware of God we must quiet our hearts at times, and learn to discern His nudges. At other times, when we are feeling low, we can choose to refocus and “get our praise on”.** As we authentically worship God, we will find our hearts will be lifted, and we will experience joy from deep inside.

As I said at the beginning of this study, **the context of this passage follows immediately after Paul talked about interactive body-life. This is not an accident.** Remember, he wrote, “This I say, *therefore* ...”? **Paul saw that this notion of learning to stop living the old way, including utilizing our emotional self-defenses, was a crucial aspect of how we learn to become an interactive team.** Our purpose is to build one another up, to help each one come to a unity of the faith, an experiential knowledge of Jesus, and to develop mature, Christ-like character. **In order for that to happen, we can’t continue to stuff our pain and run after pleasure. We need to be available to help one another.** Not only do we need to be able to meet and interact with others, but **we need to develop the ability to be led by the Holy Spirit. We also need to be able to understand and have empathy for one another, ...a capacity that can be diminished by the heart-callouses we have developed in our interactions with others. God is asking us to follow Jesus in this. He is asking us to be willing to open ourselves up to being hurt, ...to undo our defense-mechanisms and strategies..., in order that we might gain the skill and the trust to be able to help others.** He is asking us to take up our cross, ...to be willing to bear a little risk, maybe a little pain..., as we experientially-learn how to walk with Jesus in this broken world. **He is asking us to get vulnerable, to create a safe place for others to become vulnerable.** He is asking us to go deeper with God and with each other, so we can accomplish more for His kingdom. **Remember, we are not alienated from the life-flow of God’s Spirit.** We are not alone. We are not powerless. **The overcoming, resurrection power of Jesus is in us. He can make us new, ...He can equip us to help others and build them up.**