

Spiritual Foundations

Introduction

What a tragedy it is when a healthy baby is born into this world, but through malnutrition or disease or some genetic malfunction it fails to grow to a normal adult size, and remains stunted or dwarfed for life. What pain passes through its mother's heart when the expected growth never appears and natural development fails to take place. Sadder still it is to see an adult with a healthy full-grown body whose mind has not developed beyond childhood and who is totally unable to live a normal integrated human life. How the parents suffer as they struggle with all their unfulfilled hopes and dreams that can never be.

What shall we say then of those who experience a spiritual birth, but remain babies or children for life in their spiritual understanding and never grow to the maturity their Heavenly Father desires to see? Is this not a far greater tragedy? The child that might have grown to be an heir in the kingdom of God has never put away the toys of childhood. A throne remains vacant and a kingdom is in disorder.

Three times in the New Testament we find an outcry against those who should have been mature in their faith, but were still in a state of spiritual infancy. Paul told the Corinthians: 'I, brothers, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babies in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly' (1 Cor 3:1-3). Paul wrote this, we may note in passing, to people who were exercising spiritual gifts. In the previous chapter he had written briefly about the hidden mysteries and deep things of God which he might have gone on to expound, but he stops like an adult who realises his thoughts will be incomprehensible to childish minds and turns to matters they can understand.

In the letter to the Hebrews - probably from a different writer - we find similar thoughts: 'For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a baby. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil' (Heb 5:12-14). The writer had wanted to expound the mysteries of the Melchizedek priesthood, but he feared that was beyond his readers' understanding. How could they understand deep spiritual truth if their foundations were not properly laid? He went on in the subsequent verses to describe the foundations.

Jesus encountered the same problem when explaining spiritual birth to Nicodemus. 'Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things? ... If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?' John 3:10,12. Nicodemus had seen signs and miracles, and recognised Jesus as a teacher from God, but though himself a teacher in Israel he had not yet even begun a real spiritual life. To his own young disciples it was obvious that Jesus must begin with the simple truths, but with this teacher of Israel could he not share the mysteries of the kingdom of his Father in which his own heart delighted? Alas, he knew all too well it could not be done. There was no foundation; there was nothing. He must begin at the very beginning with this teacher-turned-pupil.

Would Paul meet the same problem today, if he wanted to teach the deep things of God? Would he feel like a maths professor whose students did not know their tables? or a lecturer in Greek whose pupils did not know the alphabet? I believe Paul would face worse incomprehension now than he did then! If he were to come to us and expound the scriptures for an hour or two or share something of his revelations of God, I fancy there would be a polite, but embarrassed pause when he finished, followed by a flood of questions about his missionary journeys. How many converts were there in each town and what miracles took place? What opposition did he face and what missionary methods did he think we should use today? Why did he think there was a decline in church-going and

what were his views on eschatology, the charismatic movement, capital punishment, divorce, abortion and a hundred other social-religious questions? He would need to lay again the foundations of a true life in Christ.

What then are the foundations of a spiritual life? In this writing I will examine the foundations described in Hebrews chapter 6, verses 1 and 2 which read as follows:

'Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead actions and of faith towards God, of instruction about baptisms, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement.'

In these verses there are six spiritual principles which must be built into our lives. Many people make the mistake of imagining that these are six doctrines that we must grasp with our minds. If that were so a one-week course for a person of average intelligence would easily be sufficient to lay a sound foundation, and our problems would soon be finished. We are not dealing with information for the mind, but vital spiritual principles upon which our lives must be built. We need the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit if we are to see the realities behind the words and apply them with transforming effect to our lives.

These six spiritual principles are in fact related to and dependent upon each other, but we will now take them one by one and consider their implications individually.

Repentance From Dead Actions

The first recorded teaching of both Jesus and John the Baptist in Matthew's gospel is 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Repentance was not a new concept, but one which had characterised the teaching of the prophets down the ages. It is the first necessity in relationship with God. We cannot continue in sin and expect to know God, because God's holy nature is totally opposed to it. There are two vital ingredients that make up repentance. The first is reflected in the Hebrew word 'nicham' whose root meaning is to grieve. It is related to the word meaning to groan. Repentance means sorrow for ones sin. The Greek word 'metanoeo' gives us the other ingredient which is change of mind. We see our sin in a completely new light. Our attitude to it is totally changed. We set our mind in a new direction.

We must notice that our text says dead actions rather than bad actions. It should be obvious that we must repent of all that is evil. It is true also that we must repent of that which is dead. The distinction is of vital importance. There can be a multitude of activities in our lives that spring from such motives as guilt, selfish ambition, empty tradition and bondage to other people. Almost any action that outwardly appears good can spring from these or similar corrupt inward sources. Such activities will be dead. They may include prayer, Bible study, evangelism, fellowship meetings, fasting, giving ones possessions; but if they proceed from the flesh they will still be dead. No matter how good the outward appearance we must repent of such things if we want to go on with God.

'The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace' (Rom 8:6). That which proceeds from the Spirit of God is alive; that which comes from human initiative is dead. If we want to live in the realm of God's Spirit, we must repent of and turn away from many things which are not directly wrong, but are just human in origin. We must allow the Spirit of God to search our lives and show us what is dead and what is alive, what comes from Him and what comes just from ourselves.

Faith Towards God

The second element in a true spiritual foundation is faith towards God. This faith is closely linked with the repentance from dead works which we have just considered. It is the positive side of the same coin. The opening words of Jesus in Mark's gospel are: 'Repent and believe in the gospel'. Repentance and faith must go hand in hand. Many people take the initial step of believing in Jesus for salvation, but are then frightened to take the step of leaving their dead actions. They fear that if they leave the realm of fleshly human activity there will be nothing to take its place. They want something the natural eye can see. The problem is unbelief. They believe in God as far as salvation is concerned, and maybe also for some of their practical needs; but not with regard to their spiritual life. For that they prefer something their eye can see, even if in their hearts they know it is dead.

Later in the book of Hebrews we have the Bible's most explicit chapter on faith. As we read through chapter 11, we find each person acting not on what his eyes could see, but on what God had said to him. They had faith in God. 'Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb 11:1). We have a catalogue of people who were pleasing to God. Much of what they did may not seem particularly virtuous if we analyse it. Noah built a large boat to save himself and his family. Abraham left his home city to live a nomadic life. Why was God so pleased? The reason is that these people acted on his initiative. They heard his voice and had faith to believe and obey. They were prepared to build their lives, not on their own wisdom, scheming and planning, nor in imitation of the lives of others around them, but on what God said to them. Humanly speaking they risked all, but they had faith and believed what God had said to them. Noah might have used his energies to build himself a castle. It would have seemed safer and more sensible than a boat, but it would have been a dead action springing from himself, and it would have led to both physical and spiritual death. Instead he had faith and built the ark and lived.

The essence of faith is hearing and obeying the word of God and building your life on what God has said to you. This may bring you into conflict with your religious background, your family upbringing, your personal ambitions, the desires of your flesh, the state of your pocket, the advice of your friends, and many other things beside. But faith is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4).

Baptisms

The next ingredient of a spiritual foundation is described as baptisms.

The Greek word *baptismo* translated here as baptisms (in the NIV and KJV) is translated washings in Heb 9:10: 'They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings -- external regulations applying until the time of the new order' (The NASV translates *baptismo* as washings in both places.) They are inconsistent.) The connection between these verses is vital. The baptisms referred to in both these texts are the ceremonial washings of the old covenant and their new covenant fulfilment.

John the Baptist did not invent baptism. To invent a new ceremony would have violated old testament law. Baptism had been around at least since Moses. Once we understand that the word baptism does not necessarily mean immersion, but can mean sprinkling, pouring, or washing then the picture begins to clarify. Hebrews 9 goes on to mention 3 old covenant baptisms or washings. These 3 were with water, with blood and with oil.

John the Baptist said: 'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Mat 3:11). The Hebrews were brought up with the idea of sprinklings (or baptisms) with water, blood and oil. What John the Baptist did was nothing particularly new, but based on old testament law. Jesus had a new and vastly more important baptism to bring which entirely superseded what had gone before.

Though the baptisms of the old covenant were ordained by God they were temporary, and of no lasting value. They were dead works of the law. The only baptism that has real value and benefit is the baptism that Jesus brings, the baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. The old testament baptisms with water, blood and oil all symbolised and pointed forward to the greater baptism that was to follow.

I have written on the this subject in much greater detail under the title One Baptism - Shadows and Substance.

Laying On Of Hands

Fourth in our list of the spiritual foundations is the laying on of hands. In scripture there are two main purposes of this action. The first is to impart the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. From this there springs the further concept of commissioning for ministry. Many books have been written on this subject and the Bible teaching on it is not difficult to understand. We find references mainly in Acts, but also in Numbers where Moses commissioned Joshua with the laying on of hands, and in Paul's letters. The baptism with the Holy Spirit is not an optional extra for those interested, but an essential foundation of a spiritual life. Also it should not be the climax of many years of seeking when we finally arrive. It should come at the outset of our pilgrimage.

The second purpose of the laying on of hands is for personal ministry. In this category I believe we must include both healing and deliverance from evil spirits. These two great blessings frequently come together in Scripture, and I see no clear dividing line between them. Jesus healed all those who were oppressed by the devil. Sometimes he did this by a direct word of command and sometimes with the laying on of hands. It is obviously axiomatic that Satan must be cast out of our lives if we are to go on with God. Warped and twisted personalities cannot make spiritual progress. Healing and deliverance are vital. Much of the brief personal ministry of Jesus was given to setting people free from the powers of darkness and making them whole. Many people these days have experience and can give help in these matters, and several good books are available.

Resurrection From The Dead

Next we will consider the teaching of resurrection from the dead. The New Testament clearly teaches a belief in the afterlife as it also clearly teaches that Jesus rose from the dead. What we need, though, is much more than a mental assent to these two doctrines. We need a thorough grasp of the principle of death and resurrection. Jesus stated this principle to his disciples as he faced his own death: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24).

It is not enough to say, "I know I'm going to heaven when I die". If we have properly grasped the principle of resurrection, we will accept death experiences in our present lives. We will see the frustration and failure of our cherished ambitions as a prelude to spiritual resurrection. We will trade death experiences in the flesh for life experiences in the spirit. We will loosen our grasp of the things of this world that we may tighten it on the things of God. fasting will cease to be an irrelevant enigma and become a cherished means to an end. Paul expresses his experience of this truth when he writes, 'But whatsoever things were gain to me, those things I have counted loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ ...' (Phil 3:7,8).

Had we but eyes to see we would probably find the truth of death and resurrection on every page of the Bible. Isaac goes willingly to the altar, and rises again unscathed. Joseph goes through pit, exile and prison to the place of Prime minister. Moses returns from forty year exile to lead out his people in victory. Samson rises finally from

total defeat to his greatest victory. ... Paul's cruel imprisonment in a Philippian jail suddenly becomes the spiritual birth of his jailer ... And in our time Israel rises from the ashes of her darkest hour to rebirth in her ancient land.

Can we not accept the little deaths in our lives and begin to believe that all things work together for good for them that love God?

Eternal Judgement

The last foundational truth in our list is that of Eternal Judgement. I have written a separate article on the subject of Eternal Judgement. The majority of that article was given to the common interpretation of this phrase and the question of future punishment. I gave some thoughts on the true meaning of this particular phrase. For most people the word judgement turns their minds to some great future event. There certainly will be judgements of God in the future. There are also judgements of God in the earth at this present time. I am not denying that there are judgements present and judgements to come of which we do well to be aware; but no amount of mental knowledge of judgements past present or future will ever form a foundation of a spiritual life.

We must have an experience of eternal judgement in our personal lives. To understand this, read Hebrews chapter 4 verse 12: 'The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' This is a process which we must welcome in our lives. The word of God divided between the offerings of Cain and of Abel - so similar to the natural eye. The word of God divided between Jacob and Esau, the twins from the same womb. 'Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated'. The flesh is placed under God's eternal judgement. Its works are to be burned up. It is for us to welcome and accept that judgement now. If we judge ourselves and accept God's present judgement in our lives, the judgements to come will pass us by. 'A thousand will fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand; but it shall not approach you' (Psalm 91). If on the other hand we continue to present our fleshly works to God, blindly imagining them to be spiritual because we have never waited on God to know the difference, then the fires of his judgement will burn them all up, while we stand naked in his presence.

Misconceptions

We have surveyed the scriptural foundation of a believer's life. We will now compare that with some common misconceptions. Many people see the foundations of a Christian life in terms of personal habits. After experiencing conversion, the new believer must learn to read the Bible and spend time in prayer daily, and attend regular meetings for worship, prayer and Bible study. Everything else, it is assumed, will follow out of these three.

Alas, it is not so. It is possible to spend hours and hours in Bible study and get nothing from it. Many people, both Christian and non-Christian do just that. The Pharisees probably studied the scriptures day and night, but it only increased their damnation. It did them more harm than good. The Ethiopian eunuch read the scriptures without understanding or profit until God sent Philip to open their meaning to him. Am I against reading the scriptures? I wouldn't be writing this if I were. Few things give me more delight than when the veil is lifted from my eyes and the precious Holy Spirit reveals their meaning to me. I believe that no one who neglects the Scriptures will ever reach any depth in his knowledge of God. What I am saying is that regular Bible reading is no substitute for a spiritual foundation.

Equally prayer brings with it no automatic blessing. Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims all pray, but obviously with no guarantee of God's approval. Prayer can be living communion with our Heavenly Father and the breath of life

to our souls. It can be a spiritual wrestling with the powers of darkness in which great victories are won. Or it can be a dead work undertaken on our own initiative in slavish imitation of others or selfish desire for spiritual advancement. There is no guarantee that someone who reads his Bible and prays every day will eventually come to spiritual maturity.

So also people can attend regular meetings for prayer, worship and Bible study week-in and week-out for decades and still have no real spiritual foundation. Jesus promised that where two or three were gathered together in his name, he would be present in their midst. He did not guarantee his presence at every prayer meeting or Bible study for the rest of time. When believers come together by the Holy Spirit, Jesus will be present in the midst to save, to heal, to deliver, to teach and above all to reveal himself. If our meeting is nothing more than the product of human initiative, it will be a dead action bringing nothing but death. This will sooner or later be manifested in squabbling, strife and distrust among those present. However much the Bible is studied and taught, there will be no growth to maturity. Instead there will only be death.

How then should we read the Bible, and pray and meet together? The answer is do these things on a right foundation. Repent of dead actions and have faith towards God. Be filled with the Holy Spirit and be healed and delivered from the powers of darkness. Believe in resurrection and allow the word of God to separate flesh and spirit. On these foundations Bible reading and prayer will be a blessed two-way communication between you and God. When you meet with other saints Jesus will truly be present in the midst as you share the words of life and edify one another in Him.

Conclusion

In conclusion let me place two Bible verses side by side: 'You have no need for anyone to teach you'; and 'You have need again for someone to teach you the elementary of the oracles of God.' Which of these is true of us? Are we still infants in Gods kingdom undiscerningly dependent on others for our spiritual food? Are we children playing with exciting toys? Or are we adults ready to enter our inheritance in the kingdom of our Father?