

Before and After

If I turn on the T.V. this New Year's Eve, undoubtedly I will see an image of an old man, ready to die who has a ribbon around his chest with the label, "2001" and a new-born baby with a ribbon labeled, "2002". New Year's is a time to reflect back on the past and look forward to the future. There is a single point of time where the two years meet at the stroke of midnight. We pass from 2001 to 2002- at one moment we're in one year, and in the next moment we're in the next. Once in 2002, there is no returning to 2001.

This reminds me of the Christian faith. One of the most prominent groups of passages in the New Testament are what I call the "Before and After" passages. These passages clearly spell out how God views our lives before we became a Christian and after we became a Christian. There was, like the moment the clock strikes twelve on New Year's Eve, a moment when the change occurred and there is simply no turning back. It is a new birth and the old life can never be lived again.

I became a Christian at the age of fourteen. Something drastic had happened in my life in a split second of time. I remember that exact moment, though I do know of other Christians that can't pinpoint that exact moment (though God could pinpoint it!) At the time that I became a Christian, I only had a small inkling of what had happened. I sure wish at the time someone had explained to me what my life was in God's eyes before and after I became a Christian. All I knew at the time was that before I had something missing and had need of forgiveness after I felt peace and joy and knew that Jesus Christ had come into my heart and had forgiven me of all my sin.

The book of Ephesians has some powerful imagery of this before and after...

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions- it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles [not Jews] by birth and called 'uncircumcised' [outside of God's promises to the Jews] by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' ...remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have

been brought near through the blood of Christ...you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household."

This passage is one of many such passages. Let us summarize "Before and After" passages: we have gone from _____ to _____.

1. From being spiritually blind to being able to see the eternal realities of heaven.
2. From being in darkness to entering into the light.
3. From being condemned for our sin to being forgiven of all our sin.
4. From being spiritually and eternally dead to spiritually alive."
5. From being enslaved to sin to being set free, voluntarily enslaved to righteousness.
6. From ungodly sinners lacking any power whatsoever to correct our situation to justified and cleansed saints filled with the power of the Spirit of God. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."
7. From being under God's wrath as enemies of God to becoming one with God, at peace, completely forgiven and reconciled. "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"
8. From being outside of God's family to being born into God's family. We have now become "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household"
9. From being hell-bound, a citizen of the kingdom of darkness to being a citizen of heaven, the kingdom of the Son, Jesus Christ. "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." Paul clearly broke all humanity into two camps- those whose citizenship is in heaven, and those destined for destruction. Either we are actively living for Jesus Christ, or we are His enemies- there is no middle ground.
10. From worshipping false gods and idols (anything in our lives that is more important than our faith in Jesus Christ), to worshipping the One true God, Jesus Christ our Lord.
11. From being foreigners to God's promises to inheriting all of God's promises."
12. From being without hope to being assured in our hope of eternal life and a never ending relationship with Christ.
13. From an old self, which was centered on self (self-centered) to a new self, which is centered on Jesus Christ. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"
14. From being enslaved by the law that we had broken, to coming into forgiveness in Christ. We came to Christ as broken, powerless sinners. Now that we have been given power in the Spirit to walk in God's grace, we are not to go back to the law. Instead, we are to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit and follow Him in a relationship of grace, eagerly seeking to please Him.

15. Before our minds were set on our own fleshly desires, seeking to gratify ourselves, but after we have our minds set on the desires of the Spirit of God. “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the flesh but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”
16. From being foolish and deceived to obtaining the wisdom of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ through a spiritual rebirth, “At one time we too [that’s all of us!] were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

I’ve had religious friends tell me, “I don’t need to be born again. You see, I grew up going to church. I was baptized as a baby. I was an altar boy. I’ve always been a Christian.” My challenge to anyone with this frame of thinking is to ask yourself regarding the passages above, “When did I go from ‘Before’ to ‘After’”? It is evident that there is a clear break, a moment when we go from a life of following the world and the prince of this world to following Jesus Christ. This is a choice that we make. No one else can make it for us- not the church nor our parents. It is a choice of faith, “For it is by grace you are saved through faith.” There is a time when we become conscious that we are a sinner in need of the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Being baptized as a baby, raised in a church, doing certain good works or going through religious motions isn’t what saves us. God knows our hearts. Was there a time we truly recognized our sinfulness and trusted in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins? Jesus said, “You must be born again to enter the kingdom of God.”

Whenever we see a conversion in the New Testament, we see a radical departure from the past. They all serve as reminders of what our own lives should be like as Christians. We were called out of darkness, from serving the world and our fleshly desires to giving our lives to Jesus Christ.

Matthew the tax collector was busy extorting money from fellow Jews when Jesus called him to leave everything and follow Him. Matthew left everything behind and followed Jesus. Matthew had a party with his extortionist and prostitute friends, eager to have them hear Jesus as well. The Pharisees, who saw themselves as favored in God’s eyes, complained that Jesus hung around sinners. Jesus addressed them point blank, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” The Pharisees saw themselves as righteous and failed to receive the healing touch of forgiveness of sins because of their lack of seeing their sin before a Holy God and repenting and receiving His grace. There are many today who call themselves Christians, Jews or Muslims or any other religion that never truly have seen their

sinfulness before a Holy God and repented and received the forgiveness that can only come through the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on that cross for the payment of our sins.

Jesus met a Samaritan woman at the well at noontime, a time when people weren't out and about due to the heat, unless they did not want to be seen by the public. Jesus began to tell her about the kingdom of God and then gently prophesied about her life, that she had made a wreck of her life- four marriages and divorces and was currently living with a man. The woman came to realize Jesus was the Messiah and put aside all shame, rushing into town to tell everybody the good news. The end result was that "Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I ever did.'" Do we have that passionate gratitude and desire to tell everyone we know about what Jesus has done for us? When one has been born again and understands what he/she has been delivered from, one can't keep from telling others what Jesus has done for us!

At one point Jesus was anointed by a prostitute, who was desperate to receive forgiveness of sins. She must have wondered to herself, "I believe He is the Messiah, but will He forgive me of my sins? I'm so desperate, so lonely, so longing for peace, so desiring change in my life. I don't care any longer- I must do something. I will anoint Him with my most prized possession- my expensive perfumed oil, and hope beyond hope that the compassion that I believe I saw in His eyes for others could indeed be shed on me if I humble myself before Him and cry out to Him! I don't care if I have to rush into that Pharisee's house and face the judgment of those men- I'll do anything to be set free!" And so it was recorded that "She stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them...Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'" I can relate to that woman, for I too have been forgiven of much and my gratitude pours out- often in tears as I am overwhelmed by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ in my life.

Can we respond to Jesus Christ in any other way than this? The Pharisees did- they failed to see their need. Once Jesus told them a story to attempt to open up some of their hardened hearts regarding their need of forgiveness, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men- robbers, evildoers, adulterers- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'" _

The Pharisees never did see their need. They never had a deep gratitude towards God for His forgiveness, for they truly thought that they were worthy of praise in God's eyes.

There are so many today in the same boat- deceived about their lack of need for repentance and forgiveness. They put the mask of hypocrisy on and declare to the world, "I'm ok- there's nothing wrong with me." It is time to get rid of the mask. Search your heart if that is where you are- there is forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. He alone can bring you into the light and fill you up, forgive you of sin and give you a new life.

Paul was a Pharisee who had it all together, or so he thought and so did everyone else think as well. He was highly thought of, a teacher of teachers, faultless in the world's eyes, but there was something missing- he didn't have a relationship with God. He had all the outward rules and looked great on the outside, but his inside had never changed. My moral and religious friend- have you bowed the knee to Jesus Christ and come before Him a sinner in need of forgiveness? Paul spoke of his life as a religious and zealous Jew prior to becoming a Christian. "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." "You have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers."

The way Paul was brought up was in religion. He had learned to the infinite degree what was right and wrong according to what he had been raised in, and he sought to obey it with all his heart, but he never had a relationship with God. It was merely striving through obedience to a set of laws and rituals to obtain righteousness from God. If the Paul described here (before he became a Christian) were a Jew today, he would have zealously followed every letter of the book. If he were a Muslim, you would have seen him faithfully obeying the five pillars of Islam and seeking to spread the faith with fervor. If he were a Catholic or a Protestant or a Greek Orthodox, you would find him at church often, praying, performing good deeds, faithfully giving money, and going through every ritual- but without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul spoke of how meaningless all this was- it never could get him salvation. It never could transform his heart. It never could provide him peace. "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them [my past religiosity] rubbish [literally "dung"], that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law [obedience to a set of rules, customs, standards and rituals he was brought up in], but that which is through faith in Christ- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection."

Christianity isn't a religion! It's not about a list of do's and don'ts! It is a relationship, a walk, an intimacy with our Creator who will guide us step by step as we seek to grow in our relationship with Him and pursue doing what pleases Him.

Paul reminisced later in life about the wonderful grace of God to transform him from the inside out, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners- of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." _

I can say Amen to that! Indeed I follow in Paul's example. The more I see what my life was like without Jesus Christ, the more I agree with him: yes, I'm the worst of sinners, deserving of God's wrath, but flooded with His wonderful grace, mercy and love as I have come to faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. I will shout it from the rooftops that salvation is found in none other than Jesus Christ. I am free, and I long to see all receive the freedom that can only be found in following Jesus Christ. He has taken the old man, the "Before" and has made me into a new man, the "After." The old man is dead and the newborn child lives and hungers for growth to please and know and grow in the grace and love of my Lord Jesus Christ. I will live for Him forever more!

In Christ's Love,
Mike Porter

References

Ephesians 2:1-13, 19

John 9:39

John 12:46

John 5:24, cf. Romans 8:1-2, Colossians 1:14

Colossians 2:13, cf. John 5:24, Romans 6:6-8, 11-12, 8:10, Galatians 5:24, Ephesians 2:1, 4-5, Colossians 3:1-5

John 8:34, cf. Galatians 4:8-9, 5:1, Titus 3:3, Romans 6:6-8, 11-23, 7:14-25

Romans 5:6,8, Titus 3:7

Romans 5:9-10, cf. Ephesians 2:3, 14-16, Philippians 3:18, Colossians 1:21-22

Ephesians 2:19, cf. 1 Peter 2:10, John 8:35

Colossians 1:13, cf. Philippians 3:18-20, Ephesians 2:1-6, Luke 11:23

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10

Ephesians 2:12-13

Ephesians 2:12-13

Ephesians 4:22-24, cf. Romans 6:6

2 Corinthians 5:17

Romans 8:8-10, cf. Galatians 5:16-24, Philippians 3:19, 2 Timothy 3:1-9

Ephesians 4:17-20, 23

Titus 3:3-7

John 1:10-13

Ephesians 2:8-9

John 3:3, cf. John 1:12-13, 3:1-18, 1 Peter 1:3, 23, 1 John 4:7, 5:1, James 1:18, 2

Corinthians 5:17

Matthew 9:12

John 4:39

Luke 7:38, 48, 50

Luke 18:9-14

Philippians 3:4-6

Galatians 1:13-14

Philippians 3:7-10

1 Timothy 1:12-17