

The Roadmap for the Journey (1/4)

The Process of the Christian Journey
(*The Nature of Spiritual Formation*)
(Eph. 4:1-6, 11-16)

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Introduction:

In his book, *Invitation to a Journey*, Robert Mulholland defines spiritual formation for us: "Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others." (Mulholland)

How does God work transformation in your life? Does He miraculously touch your life every once and a while to bring you to a higher level of spiritual maturity? Or, does He use what could better be described as a process that brings you into an ever-deepening experience with Him?

Because we live in a culture of instant gratification, we tend to look for spiritual maturity more in terms of an occasional miraculous touch from God, a crisis experience, rather than a gradual growth process over a longer period of time.

Again, quoting Robert Mulholland: "Often our spiritual quest becomes a search for the right technique, the proper method, the perfect program that can immediately deliver the desired results of spiritual maturity and wholeness."

It has been my experience that God works more in the gradual process of spiritual growth than He does in crisis experiences. That is not to say that He cannot perform a miracle and move

instantaneously to fulfill His will. Probably, if we would study the crisis experiences that come in life, we would discover that they come at the end of a long maturing process that prepared us for the crisis experience.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul talks about the process that God uses to bring us to spiritual maturity as followers of Christ. Today we are going to take a look at Ephesians chapter four.

Sermon Body:

The manner of our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

Unity of the Spirit

[1] Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,

Walk in a worthy manner, which is governed by your calling which, comes from the Lord. But, quite honestly, what does that look like?

Both Peter and Judas claimed to be true followers of Jesus while He was doing public ministry here on earth. They both gave up everything and followed Jesus. They both saw and participated in the miracles Jesus performed. They both saw Jesus interact with the public, and both of them listened to the preaching and teaching of Jesus.

Both of them stepped out against Jesus the night He had His last meal with the disciples. Three times Peter denied that he knew or ever followed Jesus. Judas betrayed Jesus, taking money to show

the soldiers where Jesus was so they could arrest Him.

Judas did not walk in a manner worthy of the call that Christ had given him to be one of His disciples. Peter made a drastic mistake as a disciple of Jesus but later repented and continued to follow Jesus. That repentance showed that Peter was walking in a manner worthy of the calling Jesus gave him to be one of His disciples.

It does not take perfect performance to walk worthy of the calling we have to be a follower of Jesus Christ, it takes living the repentant lifestyle.

Remember, a repentant lifestyle is a lifestyle where the follower of Christ is continually walking toward God, and away from sin and temptation.

The spirit of our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[2] with all **humility** and **gentleness**, with **patience**, showing **tolerance** for one another in love,

Walk in the true nature of love, which is revealed in your humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance toward others. This love is the heart of the fellowship of believers, which we talked about in our last series.

Think about how the key words in this verse play out in a community. Humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance all go a long way to help a community be unified, functional, and pleasant.

The tenacity of our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[3] being **diligent** to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

With diligence and perseverance, seek unity in the Spirit of God. The phrase, "be diligent," reveals the tenacity of our walk in following Christ.

The Greek word used here for diligent, "signifies 'to hasten to do a thing, to exert oneself, endeavor...'" (CWS-NT, g4704)

Have you ever been sitting in a meeting where a need to have someone do something comes up? Here is something that needs to be done but no one really wants to do it. Awkward isn't it. Diligence hastens to do it without hesitation. That is how Paul calls us to approach unity and peace in our relationship with each other and with God.

The partnership of our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[4] There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;

[5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

[6] one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Again, fellowship and the importance of community seem to be very important in following Christ.

Our calling is **embedded** in the reality of one body and Spirit, which are seen in a common hope, a common calling, a single Lord, a common faith, a common baptism, a single God, and a common Father.

I chose the word **embedded** because I believe that that word expresses what Paul was trying to get across here. Embedded means: "(an object) fix firmly and deeply in a surrounding mass; (an idea or feeling) implant within something else so it becomes an ingrained or essential characteristic of it." (Apple iPad Dictionary)

In other words, our calling in life is **fixed** firmly and deeply in one body with a common Spirit, a common hope, a common calling, a single Lord, a common faith, a common baptism, a single God, and a common Father.

Our calling in life is **implanted** in one body by a common Spirit, a common hope, a common calling, a single Lord, a common faith, a common baptism, a single God, and a common Father, until it becomes ingrained as an essential characteristic of our daily life and character.

There is an Old Testament account that illustrates this beautifully.

Daniel 3 (NASB)

[3] Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces were assembled for the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

[4] Then the herald loudly proclaimed: "To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language,

[5] that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon,

psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. [6] "But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire."

There was a conspicuous trio of men who refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's gold image. It sent the king into a rage to think that there were people in his kingdom that would openly disobey his command.

Daniel 3 (NASB)

[13] Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego; then these men were brought before the king.

[14] Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?

[15] "Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"

This king was placing himself above any god, and specifically above the God that Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego served and worshiped.

This is the same thing we do when we refuse to live the repentant lifestyle. We are telling God that what we want to do with our life is more important than His calling and will for our life.

Daniel 3 (NASB)

[16] Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter.

[17] "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

[18] "But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

[19] Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with wrath...

This is one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible. This statement shows us exactly what Paul has been trying to say to the church at Ephesus, which is also a message for you and me in the twenty-first century.

- One body
- One Spirit
- One hope
- One Lord
- One faith
- One baptism
- One God
- One Father

...Who is over all, and through all, and in all.

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, when we allow God to be over us; when we allow God to work through us; when we allow God to be in us as Lord of our lives, we exhibit these characteristics as individuals, and as His body the church.

There is one body working together in unity and harmony.

There is one Spirit, with a single voice leading the Body of Christ in unity and harmony.

There is one hope for the future, leading to a common conclusion.

There is one Lord, in charge, one ruler sitting on every heart's throne.

There is one faith that comes out of a single source that reaches back to the very foundations of the universe.

There is one baptism, which symbolizes the single entry point of an old rugged cross, which represents death to sin and self and new life in Jesus Christ.

There is one God who created everything. In His act of creation, He witnesses to His power and ability to provide all the needs, of all the people, of all generations.

There is one Father who models the love, mercy, forgiveness, and patience of a heavenly Father that can be trusted no matter what circumstances we might face in life.

Daniel 3 (NASB)

[28] Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who **put their trust in Him**, violating the king's command, and **yielded up their bodies** so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God.

Nebuchadnezzar recognized two important things about Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

1. They put their trust in God
2. They yielded up their bodies to God

The most important part of this Biblical account is not the fact that God delivered Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, because God does not always deliver people from their circumstances.

The most important fact is this; these three men stood together and refused to worship an idol in spite of the apparent and great cost of that refusal.

They understood that even though they were the only three to defy king Nebuchadnezzar, they were part of a greater body, working together in unity and harmony to make up the Kingdom of God throughout all the ages of time.

They understood that there was one Spirit, with a single voice leading the three of them in unity and harmony to follow the will of Almighty God no matter what it cost them.

They had a single hope for the future, leading to a common conclusion. Whether they died together in their commitment to God, or were delivered from the fire, they stood in the hope that God would take care of them in a way that this king never could.

They obeyed one Lord and placed Him in charge of their lives and their future. Together they had one ruler sitting on the thrones of each of their hearts.

They had a single faith that came out of a common source that reached back to the very foundations of the universe.

They were about to go through a baptism of fire. A baptism that stands to this day as a symbol of the life commitment they shared in the one true God.

They recognized that this one God who created everything, had the ability, power, and resources to take them to a better place, heal them in the aftermath of the destructive fires of the furnace, or deliver them from the fire altogether.

They knew, intimately, this one Father who showed them the love, mercy, forgiveness, and patience of a heavenly Father that could be trusted no matter what circumstances they might face in life.

This is what Paul is trying to communicate to the church at Ephesus, and it is the message God wants to communicate to you and I today.

This is where the process of our Christian journey takes us. So! What is your calling in Christ? Today, what has He called you to do as one of His followers? What has He called our local congregation to do?

Often we confuse profession of Christ and socializing in the Christian community with following Christ. But, being a follower of Jesus Christ is a sacrifice of our entire life to Him.

As individuals, and as a local congregation, God has given us a commission, and that commission is more than being a community. That commission impels us to reach out beyond our community into a lost and dying world.

Paul goes on to explain the process by talking about how God organized the church, His Body.

The organization of our partnership in walking with God

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[11] And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

Paul lists some specific offices or positions in the church, which use different means to accomplish what is called the process of the Christian journey.

The equipping of our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[12] for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

These specific offices are for the purpose of equipping the saints to do works of service in the church for the community of the followers of Christ, and in the world, to bring other people into the Kingdom of God.

The body of Christ must be built up in two ways.

1. The saints themselves must be making progress toward the fullness of Christ. This is the emphasis Paul is speaking about in our passage today. This is an emphasis on spiritual growth.
2. We must never forget that we also have a great commission from our Lord. That commission is a reaching out to the world.

Matthew 28 (NIV)

The Great Commission

[16] Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. [17] When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. [18] Then Jesus came to them and said, "**All authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Remember what king Nebuchadnezzar said when Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego refused to worship his idol? "What god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"

Only Jesus could make a claim

like this. And as Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego were delivered from the fire of the furnace they were thrown in, so Jesus was delivered from the grave His mutilated body was thrown in. This is the power behind the commission we have been given.

Matthew 28 (NIV)

[19] Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
[20] and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

I have often had people tell me that they are shy and can't think about what to say to tell people about following Jesus. They say that the outspoken Christians are to do evangelism, but that is a misunderstanding of Jesus method of evangelism.

Yes, there are those who are outspoken and can easily talk to others about following Jesus, but that was not the emphasis that Jesus placed on evangelism or the great commission.

Evangelism is demonstrating the Kingdom of God in lifestyle and witness. The emphasis that Jesus placed on evangelism, in both practice and word was to meet the needs of others.

Read (Matthew 25:31-46), we have looked at it several times this year. It talks about loving people by helping to

meet their basic needs, food, water, clothes, and fellowship. And, we are not just to meet the needs of the church; we are to meet the needs of the least of those God puts in our pathway.

The goal of our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

The concept is maturity, the target or goal is a stature that measures to the fullness of Christ. This is where the Christian journey takes us and it is a lifelong process.

The results of our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[14] As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;
[15] but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,

This is what the fullness of Christ looks like, and it is found in the pages of His Word, and in the genuine leading of His Holy Spirit in daily living. We have seen it in a very real way today as we looked at Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

The health we obtain in our walk with God:

Ephesians 4 (NASB)

[16] from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

This is the result of our progress. An old timer might say, a well-oiled machine. It describes a group of people who know and carry out their function or calling from the Lord. Like the different organs of a body working together for the health and proper function of the entire body.

The common blood that flows through all the veins, to all the different parts and organs of the body, is the love of God. It is that same blood that can be transfused out into a lost and dying world to give them life. The healthy body works together to reach out with the life giving blood of God's mercy, forgiveness, patience, and love.

This is our calling. This is our journey. This is the process of the spiritual life that has surrendered to the lordship of the Creator of the universe.

Credits:

CWS-NT - AMG Complete Word Study Dictionary - New Testament (CWS_NT). Cedar Rapids: Laridian Electronic Publishing, 2007.

Mulholland, M. Robert Jr., Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation, Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1993.

NASB - New American Standard Bible (NASB). Cedar Rapids: Laridian, 2002.

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