

The Natural Man, the Old Man and the Bible

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One day, when looking through my bank statement, I discovered charges on my debit card I had not made. My bank account was exposed. Near frantic phone calls to shut this debit card down were intensified because it was after hours. Call after call, my daughter, Claire (eleven at the time), was following me around, calmly listening to the conversations ... including my remarks between futile phone calls. One remark was a prayer ... asking for God to damn that person and all involved in this type of activity. By the next day ... the thief was identified. Guess who? You can imagine the terror that struck my heart at that moment ... on several fronts. For starters, I wanted to take that request back, but I also knew ... God hates sin exponentially more than do I. This entire scene spelled trouble.

This is not the first time I have made a request of God along these lines. In justifying such prayer requests, I have leaned upon the God-inspired imprecatory passages - many found in the Psalms (7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137, 139, etc.). In fact, I am of the conviction that Psalm 69:20-23, and Psalm 109, are the thoughts and prayers of Jesus while on the cross. Take a moment and go read those. I am aware of Luke 9:51-56, 19:10 and John 3:17 which, at first blush, may challenge the propriety of imprecatory calls. But, I am also aware of saints before the Throne who are calling for justice ... and God did not rebuke this desire (Rev 6:9-11). Divine justice has never been an evil thing ... and never will be. Indeed, His justice is one of the great hopes of Christianity, and a great promise by our Creator. But, is that what we want upon those around us? The answer is actually ... yes. You may not think you want divine justice exacted upon those around you, but you do. Into this we must look.

The Natural Man

Man, in his natural state, is in trouble with God. *“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God”* (Jn 3:18). The word, “judged” is “*krino*.” Its primary meaning is, “*to separate, or to make a distinction between.*” And “*krino*” is in the perfect tense. That means a determination has been made in the past and its results extend to the present. Therefore, many translations use the word, “*damned*” or “*condemned*” - as that is the unbeliever's status. When we encounter an individual who has reached the age of accountability for his/her misdeeds (determined by God for each individual), we are engaging one who is already condemned. We do not have to ask God to damn one ... who already is.

The Natural Man's Fate

There is no retrial available for the natural man. Additionally, God has no interest, and makes no attempt, at reforming the natural man. Justice alone awaits him. God's justice identifies, and metes out, the correct weight of penalty due. God knows this is right - and necessary. *“The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. And men will say, ‘Surely there is a reward for the righteous; Surely there is a God who judges on earth’”* (Ps 58:10,11). However, God has forged ...

One Other Option

God has made one way of escape from the natural man. Not escape *for* him - but escape *from* him. When a person calls upon the Lord (Ro 10:13), turns to the Lord (2Cor 3:16), believes upon Him (Jn 3:15), receives Him (Jn 1:12) - in other words, makes a successful transaction in getting right with

God - several miracles occur simultaneously. For starters, the believer is *"born again"* (Jn 3:3) and becomes *"a new creation"* (2 Cor 5:17) ... gaining a *"new man"* (Eph 4:24). A fresh start is granted in dealing with life. So, what happens to the natural man? Well, he does not vanish. But, several things happen to him ... and other things will happen to him.

Of First Importance ...

God has determined the natural man can meet his just end ... in Jesus Christ on the cross. The justice God requires be exacted upon him ... Jesus can satisfy. The Father *"was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief if He would render Himself as a guilt offering"* - which He did. *"As a result of the anguish of His soul, He (God, the Father) will see it and be satisfied"* (Isa 53:10,11). The result? For all who come to Him, He *"canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us, He has taken it out of the way having nailed it to the cross"* (Col 2:14). My natural man, who was ushering me headlong into God's wrath, was intercepted, and neutered, by Jesus Christ who *"bore (my) sins in His body ... the just for the unjust"* (1Pet 2:24 and 3:18). God does not sweep aside justice on the natural man ... He just makes provision for him to be dealt with in this one other way.

Then ...

The moment an individual takes advantage of this option, the natural man ... is renamed. He is now, *"the old man"* (Eph 4:22). In this arrangement there is both blessing and curse. Curse first.

The Old Man: A Curse

The old man causes the Christian a world of trouble. Here is the simplest way to understand this. Every single sin that a Christian commits is a function of the natural man ... now, *"the old man."* Each sin can be traced directly to him. Is that simple or what?

There are two aspects to this trouble. The first is that the saint can simply rationalize and/or coddle his/her sin desires. The old man remains a lover of *"the darkness rather than the light"* (Jn 3:19). But, there is a second, even more danger-filled aspect to this story. Though *"the old man"* is corralled and slated for defeat (1Cor 1:8, Phil 1:6, 1Thes 5:23-24, 1Pet 5:10), it appears he gets worse with age. He *"matures"* - and becomes more cunning. God admonishes, *"... in reference to you former manner of life, lay aside the old man, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit"* (Eph 4:22). The old man *"is being corrupted"* - a passive participle. That means he is being acted upon (passive) and the present tense indicates ongoing action. According to this passage, the agents of this ongoing corrupting power ... are lusts - that are deceitful.

To be sure, the old man is a willing *"victim"* of these deceitful lusts, and he learns how to present more finely honed rationalizations for *"harmless"* participation in some particular sin area. God warns the Christian against being *"hardened by the deceitfulness of sin"* and becoming *"blind or short sighted"* (Heb 3:13 and 2Pet 1:9). For any degree of victory over the old man, and his ever more skilled presentations, the Christian must stay in a continual pursuit of God and His concerns. *"For the grace of God has appeared ... instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age"* (Ti 2:11,12). See Endnote 1.

The Old Man: Attack or Be Attacked

The saint is to be on offense. One's old man is to be targeted for destruction. *"(If) by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God"* (Ro 8:13,14). Led ... to put to death the deeds of the body - the old man. No negotiation, no reform. One is being Spirit led who correctly identifies the enemy within and proceeds to renounce and rout him. Jesus came to *"destroy the works of the devil"* - our practice of sin

being that work (1Jn 3:8). He has tools and power available for our employ so we might be freed from sin. *“Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin ... If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed”* (Jn 8:34,36). Freed. Delivered. Sin becomes past tense.

When a Christian forever abandons some sin, to those outside it may look like reform. But true deliverance from some sin involves the death of that sin - the new man eternally overcoming that part of the natural man/old man. And oftentimes, the Christian is not even sure when final victory has actually transpired. Here is a personal example.

In my *“natural man”* days, I was a substance abuser. After calling upon the Lord, a short, but intense season of struggle ensued. The final blow came about six weeks into my Christian experience. I lost a job due to drinking. The humiliation was great (recounted elsewhere) and I made a vow that no alcohol would ever again pass my lips. I ended this vow, *“Oh God, help me keep this vow!”* I later discovered He did not want us making vows (Mt 5:33-37) - but it was too late. So, I asked Him to pardon the vow ... but honor the request. My war with the old man in this arena was now fully engaged.

Several *“incidents”* occurred in the days and months ahead. Temptations were sometimes subtle, sometimes overt. But, by His grace, I did not succumb. After about a year, I found myself in a social event after a softball game, graced with all the substances I had been warring. When I went home that evening, I suddenly realized - there had been no *“pull”* to participate. I was no longer fighting ... the desire was gone. When that *“pull”* actually vanished - I can't say. That was over thirty years ago. Presently, my wife consumes beer and wine. I am sure both are in our refrigerator right now. My oldest daughter socially drinks. My mom, too. My brother, when on vacation, always has a beer in hand. But I have never see them drunk. I have never even discerned any noticeable effects of the alcohol in them. I am very happy for the enjoyment they seem to get from their moderation, but as a weaker brother, that ability was never mine. But, I do not feel deprived by this as I enjoy sobriety so much that the idea of doing anything to affect that ... never even enters my mind. As best as I can tell, I believe that part of my old man is truly dead.

I am aware that *“pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before stumbling”* (Pr 16:18). Sin is deceitful, our hearts are deceitful, and Satan is The Tempter ... always lurking for an opportune time to entangle the saint in some sin (Heb 3:13, Jer 17:9, Mt 4:3 and Lk 4:13). Therefore, I do not expect anyone to fully embrace my assertion of victory over such a sin pattern until/if I exit this age in that victory. But, in this area, that part of my old man may truly be dead. Time will verify this suspicion one way or the other. And I fully acknowledge ... sin is powerful.

The Old Man: *Sometimes He Still Wins ... For a Season*

It is true ... the Christian is not perfect - just forgiven. At the time of this writing, I have been a Christian for 34+ years. I have committed a mountain of sin in many areas during that span. Quite honestly, it is amazing, and appalling, at how much I still sin. In fact, the more I learn of His ways and desires, often, all I can do is shake my head in humiliation at myself. And each sin can be traced directly to my failure at overcoming my old man. We do not always, on our own, defeat the old man. If we did, God would never rebuke, discipline or scourge us. But He does - and we are all partakers of that (Heb 12:5-13). So, the old man sometimes still wins ... but only for a season.

Actually, the old man is vulnerable to attack from at least three different sources. The first *“assaulter”* is our new man as we purpose obedience to God in areas we know need address. The second *“assailant”* is a spiritual brother or sister coming to us by private meeting and, if necessary and appropriate, advancing the situation through the entire church discipline process (Mt 18:15-17). The emphasis here is *“a spiritual brother or sister.”* That means actual sin is being addressed - and the timing is right. God works on His children in stages as they grow. Some sins may need to be *“overlooked”* for a time because of one's maturity level. *“A man's discretion makes him slow to anger,*

and it is his glory to overlook a transgression” (Pr 19:11). Wisdom from God, case by case, is indispensable. (See Endnote 2). The final “*aggressor*” of our old man was referenced in the previous paragraph ... our living Creator. Sometimes, He acts directly ... with surgical, precise strikes. He always accomplishes His mission. “*All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful, yet ... afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*” (Heb 12:11).

The Old Man: *Deliverance*

“*The natural man*” of the unsaved individual, or “*the old man*” of the saved individual, is death in his activities - and is destined to it. But, for the Christian, total deliverance from this death-bound marauder is slated. At the moment of deliverance, the Christian will never sin again for all eternity. This will be, as far as I am concerned, the miracle of miracles. Maybe it is arrogant for me to rank the plethora of God's miracles (past, present and future) by such a statement, but when I think of myself never sinning again for all eternity ... this is beyond my comprehension. At any rate, sanity finds the saint presently applying himself/herself so as to gain as much victory as possible ... now. That is the place of life and one can thus taste “*the powers of the age to come*” (Heb 6:5). Righteousness has power too, you know.

The Old Man: *A Blessing*

In spite of all the destruction and grief wrought by “*the old man*” - there is an upside. His presence in me means ... I am saved! Praise God for this war! Praise God for this malady! There are only two categories of humanity in this age at any given moment: those who are only the natural man - and those who have had him relegated by God to the old man. This great spiritual truth is foolishness to the unsaved, but to those of us in Jesus Christ, it is wisdom from God (1Cor 2:12-16).

The Old Man: *Why Isn't He Just Immediately Eradicated?*

I don't really know. If he was gone, my Christian witness would be flawless. To me, that seems like a good thing ... especially in view of the need of everyone with whom I will ever have contact. But, that is not God's design. Here are some thoughts on this plague.

1. “*Why should any living mortal ... offer complaint in view of his sins?*” (La 3:39). All you have to do is stay alive ... and rough terrain will be encountered. This fallen creation is a strange work - I believe a once in eternity episode (See my article, “*Why Would a Perfect God Make Imperfect Beings?*”). God has many goals to accomplish in this circumstance – many of which we are not yet fully aware. So, when I am struck by this age's death blows, in light of my own sins, what room do I have for complaint? I am owed nothing good from God and in Jesus Christ I have been spared the biggest blow of all - eternal Hell. So, what's my complaint? Paul, when persecuted for being a Christian, only had to think of Stephen - and I am sure complaints vanished (Ac 8:1). When Job's wife challenged him to “*curse God and die*” he responded, “*You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?*” (Job 2:9,10). I am not saying I **do not** complain and **will not** complain. I am just saying in light of my own sinfulness, I have **no right** to complain.

2. Maybe the old man's presence makes one more appreciative of Jesus. “*If anyone does not cherish the Lord, he must be accursed*” (1Cor16:22). The word, “*cherish*” is “*phileo*.” This is often translated “*love*” but also, “*to kiss*.” The noun, “*philos*” means, “*friend*.” This is obviously the emotion element of “*love*.” It is interesting that God never commands we cherish Him, but if we don't, we “*must be accursed*.” He does command “*agapao*” (an act of the will), but not “*phileo*” (more a function of feeling). I explore all this in great detail in my free ebook, “*Love and the Bible*.” But for our purpose

here, when my sin is exposed, I am humiliated and humbled - and when I get glimpses of the cost required for its removal, a relationship deeper than words is being forged. Gratitude, appreciation, unworthiness? ... Too deep for words.

3. Maybe the old man's presence serves as a reminder that we are not *"special."* God does not forgive us because we are somehow innately better than those who remain outside of Christ. Our well-being is a function of His mercy - not any virtue that commends us for it. Even the Israelites, His chosen people, were unceremoniously informed, *"Know ... it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people"* (Deut 9:6). As a Christian, if you think differently about this, you are self-deceived. Indeed, that would be an evidence of your old man ruling - as we *"were, by nature, children of wrath, even as the rest"* (Eph 2:3). *"If anyone thinks he is something, being nothing, he deceives himself"* (Gal 6:3). Pretty unceremonious, you might say.

Good standing with Him is based upon mercy - with no personal merit. As a new Christian I wrote this in the front of my Bible: *"It's all mercy and it's all grace or, ... it's all over."* Decades later - same song.

4. Maybe He wants us to share in the joy of defeating sin. We have an opportunity to experience the joy that comes from killing the natural/old man and his strongholds. Jesus *"for the joy set before Him endured the cross despising the shame"* (Heb 12:2). He eternally extinguished the entire package of our natural man on the cross. That victory - and all that will eternally proceed from that accomplishment - produced joy inexpressible. Now, as we engage and defeat any part of our old man in our practical experience, we, too, taste that joy. This may be the only death act that produces joy - and God calls Christians into these fields. *"Behold, I have made you a new sharp threshing sledge with double edges. You will thresh the mountains and pulverize them, and will make the hills like chaff. You will winnow them, and the wind will carry them away, and the storm will scatter them. But you will rejoice in the Lord. You will glory in the Holy One of Israel"* (Isa 41:15,16). And you thought this was about external adversaries. Well, you were half right. Our war is internal and external. The more of my old man who meets death, the happier I am, the more at peace I am, the more productive I am.

Do You Remember ...

when I said you ... *"You may not think you want justice exacted upon those around you, but you do."*? Well, let's revisit that from a slightly different angle. Do you want the natural man ... in glory? Well, it doesn't matter if you want him there or not. He will not be there. For those outside of Christ, that is all they are. Any way you look at this, the natural man is on a one way path toward the justice of God, the justice from God, the wrath of God. The natural man does not belong in glory and will not be there. If you are a Christian, and spiritual, you will find yourself in agreement with God. You do want the natural man to meet his just end.

But our hope is that God will use us in directing any natural man around us to the cross. Let him meet his Maker there. Then, that sinner becomes the ex-sinner (now a saint who sometimes sins) and that person will, along with God, engage in a life-long extermination of his/her natural man - now the old man. This is a fantastic change. And victory is certain. *"And such were some of you (past tense), but you were washed, you were sanctified ("hagiazō" - "set apart, cleansed" - made virtuous), you were justified ("dikaioō" - "made right by justice, acquitted, made to stand approved") in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God"* (1Cor 6:12). The thief becomes the ex-thief - and this ex-thief (now a new man) assaults that old man. The liar, the ex-liar. The drunkard, the ex-drunkard. The fornicator, the ex-fornicator. The ..., the ex-

Pray For ... an Old Man

"Make the natural man - the old man!" That is what we want for those around us. I must tell you, this has been a very difficult article to write. *"It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Heb10:31). None of us understand how serious sin is before God. I know if I did ... I would not keep doing so much of it. I suspect the same of you. I also know that pardon extended by God toward me is a fully undeserved gift - one beyond the reach of any kind of repayment for eternity.

"Make the natural man - the old man!" God help us - God help me - pray that for everyone I encounter. That is still a call for divine justice. It is an imprecatory call on the natural man. But it is a call, a plea ... begging ... that the Lord of glory, the King of all the kings, the Judge of the heavens and earth - take the brunt of that call. *"For God did not send the Son into the world in order to condemn the world, but in order that the world should be saved through Him"* (Jn 3:17). To no one's surprise, ever since that debit card incident, that is, has been, and will always be, my prayer ... for Claire. I can entertain no other option. That is the prayer, the only prayer ... I want God to hear.

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Endnote 1: The Natural Man *"Matures,"* Too.

The old man *"matures"* in sin as he is being corrupted by ever more guile-filled lusts. Well, those who are only the natural man also *"mature"* in their sin rationales and patterns. God says *"evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived"* (2Tim 3:13). In this passage, the prepositional phrase *"from bad"* does not exist in the Greek. The Greek words were available (*"apo kakos"*), but the Holy Spirit did not use them. So, the passage actually reads, *"evil men and imposters will proceed to worse, deceiving and being deceived."* For me, this paints a different picture in that when I read, *"will proceed to worse"* the sharpness of that descent just seems more striking. Anyway, in sin's progression, the justifications become more sophisticated, with increased layers of reasoning supporting the sin determinations. At the Judgment, each layer will be peeled back, addressed, exposed ... to then crumble before the Creator. *"There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord"* (Pr 21:30). None that will prevail that is.

Sin dominates and enslaves its subjects (Jn 8:34). God speaks of delivering individuals over to their lusts (Ro 1:24) and one becomes *"melted into the power"* of his/her sin (Isa 64:7). It is true that those who remain outside of Christ can sometimes reform their behavior. And these are often very valuable reforms for his/her functioning in this life. But they remain band-aids - though still beneficial - over the deeper problem.

A prominent Christian myth, which I call Bible lore, is the pious *"love"* statement of *"separating sin from the sinner."* God doesn't. Sin does not spring from some vacuum. Sin is simply the activity of the natural man. It is his expression - like the exhaling of air. *"For from within, out the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man"* (Mk 7:21-23). Sin is what he does, so the natural man is often called in the Bible, *"the sinner."* *"(T)he one who loves violence, His soul hates"* (Ps 11:5). Where is the separation of sin from sinner/natural man? *"There are six things which the Lord hates ... a false witness who utters lies and one who spreads strife among brothers"* (Pr 6:16,19). Separation of sin from sinner? *"But for the cowardly and unbelieving ... and murderers, and immoral persons, and sorcerers and idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone"* (Rev 21:8). There is no daylight between the sin and the sinner because sin is simply *"an arm"* of the sinner, the natural man. Sin, sinner, natural man ... they are all one.

Endnote 2

As a somewhat extreme example of this point, when I was on staff at a Christian drug rehab, some fellows who made a profession of faith tried to quit everything all at once - drugs, drinking, smoking - just to fall back into the drugs/drinking. While there is no one more hostile to tobacco than me, I could often be heard saying, *“Don't worry about cigarettes right now. Concentrate on getting away from the drugs/alcohol. 'No drunkard will enter the kingdom of heaven' (1Cor 6:10). You must gain victory over your drugs/drinking. Later you can address the cigarettes - unless you are absolutely certain you can currently fight several fronts at once.”* While smoking cigarettes are not acts of righteousness, I do think there will be saved individuals who exit this life addicted to nicotine. But one who exits this life deemed a drunkard by God, will perish. My point? Christianity is a growth process. Just as a Christian grows in righteousness, he/she at the same time is growing out of sin. Both are growth processes on some kind of time-line. If we are going to interject ourselves into this process (of one of our brothers/sisters), it behooves us to take stock as to where they are in their growth process ... and if God is wanting to use us in that process, by confronting some sin. Often the answer is obvious (look at the entire list in 1Cor 6:9-11), but sometimes we need to grant some space, time and grace. In such matters, formulas are hard to come by. Wisdom from God is needed - case by case.

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