



Into the Light

All things are possible with God

January—February 2010

Oaks of Righteousness

By Bob Van Domelen

"The Lord has anointed me . . . to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendor" (Isaiah 61.3).

If ever there were a title difficult to accept, it would be to have someone call us "oaks of righteousness." It's difficult because given our past experiences in sin, we might never see ourselves as righteous—period. Improving yes, righteous no.

I answer many letters from individuals who believe that they have no right to be treated with respect. Some even believe that others have the right to cause them physical harm—all because of their offenses against children. They live in an atmosphere where sex offenders exist at the bottom-most rung of acceptability and have, I think, come to believe that such an opinion is accurate.

Twenty-two years ago, I heard individuals brag about drug charges or white collar crime when in fact they were in my group sex offender treatment program. Sometimes the lie worked, most times it didn't. But the interesting point is that they were trading one sin for another because the new sin was more acceptable to other inmates and less dangerous for them. And in the trade, all concept of victim basically disappeared. If the letters I receive are any indication, these conversations and evasions of truth continue to exist.

But change IS possible. Repentance IS possible. Restoration IS possible. None of these things is easily achieved but they are indeed possible.

Okay, I have now inched my way toward the Scripture I chose for this article. If these things are possible, and I believe they are, then it would be good to look at how we might be making the transformation more difficult than it is.

We must look at the sins we have committed, understand their heinous nature, acknowledge the harm they caused, yet refuse to wear those sins as an identity. It is a wrongfully worn identity that can become a wedge between us and all that God has for us. We cannot accept what we believe we have no right to accept.

a crown of beauty instead of ashes

For a good number of years, I felt like one of those Jesus described as a white-washed sepulcher, clean on the outside yet filled with everything unclean. No matter what I did that was right, the scale upon which I weighed my moral life tipped heavily in favor of my hidden sins.

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the

crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (James 1.12) Before my arrest, I read these words but believed my particular sin made me ineligible. My arrest, however, was in some ways like a veil finally being pulled aside so that I could see what I could not see before. I started to see the man I was born to be.

the oil of gladness instead of mourning

For a very long time, I felt that laughing was wrong and feelings of happiness were a betrayal of the repentance others expected of me. I had the impression that others expected me to seek forgiveness but I was meant to cower in some corner because that was my place. This attitude of accepting the loathing and even physical harm at the hands of others as a consequence of being a child molester fits the description shared by many in their letters.

It just occurred to me to consider the attitude of the thief who had just heard the words "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.*" (Luke 23.43) He was still hanging on the cross, still had not died, and still had to endure more pain. But I can imagine something deep inside him rejoicing though not truly sure why he should feel that way.

Following my arrest and into my time in prison, I was reminded by others of God's mercy, of salvation won for me by Jesus on the cross, and of the manner in which the Holy Spirit prompted new behaviors in my life. The consequences of my crimes did not disappear. They demanded sober reflection. They still do. The difference, however, is that my sober reflection is balanced with the joy and gladness I find in my new identity, an identity that does not hide.

a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair

I can remember friends on the unit who attended chapel services with me. Some days they would look at me and say, "I don't think I want to go to chapel. It's been a bad week — maybe I'll feel more like worshipping next week."

Sin and circumstances can be a garment of despair, a garment that whispers "Why bother. You're nothing but a sinner who keeps breaking promises. God is probably tired of hearing you recite the same failings anyway, so you might as well skip services." Too often, we listen to that voice of despair, stay away from times of worship, and then wonder if we will ever feel right again.

The garment of praise, on the other hand, is not a spotless garment but rather one that bears the stain of human failing. It is a garment that we all wear in the best of times and one God understands. Our free will helped create the stains; our repentance and desire to seek God becomes the cleansing agent.

We often enter the sanctuary noticing the others attending. Sometimes we see them with judgment based on our memory of the failings we observed in them during the week. In worship, we hear God's Word and the message meant for all of us. Little by little, we forget those around us and approach God's throne with a voice raised and an open heart. The garment that weighed heavily on our shoulders becomes transformed; the spirit within each of us joins the countless multitudes in heaven giving God praise and glory.

**called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord,
for the display of his splendor**

Living is, forgive me for stating the obvious, a process. No one gets through without staining his or her garment with the mess caused by living and less-than-perfect choices. But isn't the point *not* that we sin and even sin grievously, but that despite and perhaps because of our sins *we continue to seek God*. We know that we are God's children; we know that we are heirs to the kingdom.

Each of us, whether in prison or not, has been created uniquely so as to praise, serve, and be a witness of God's love.

But what of the world?

By the time I got to this point in writing, it became obvious to me that some of you have already started rolling your eyes. Everything I have shared is so spiritual and the world we live in is far from spiritual. The world we live in will deny sex offenders housing and employment. Churches will close their doors to someone on the sex offender registry; ministries will shrug and say "We really wish we could help but there isn't much we can do."

Somehow this reminds me of the people who decide against church until "things are better." And in honesty, isn't it easier to tackle what we'd call the issue of the basics of survival first and worry about God things later? That, some of you would remind me, is life.

At the same time, I do get letters from sex offenders who have told me that they literally wondered where they would be spending the next evening or where they would get their next meal. They write to say that they are okay and that they continue to trust God to meet their needs. I certainly don't know how they survive but for their faith. But then *faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*. (Hebrews 11.1)

They will be called oaks of righteousness

If you are waiting for someone to make the changes you need in your life for you, the effort will always fall short. On the other hand, if you and I are willing to trust God to do what God does best, we will not be disappointed. Life certainly will not look as we think it should. It will be better. Perhaps not in the material sense but in the sense that matters the most.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9.8) □

Bits & Pieces

The following are all from letters I have received in recent months. As always, I hope something you read will bring you encouragement and hope.

In the last issue (November-December 2009), I was able to share a lot of *Bits & Pieces* with others because, while emphasizing spirituality, these clips did not mention the particular addiction intended. That allowed me to share without revealing unintended information.

For years I have struggled with the thought or idea that I deserve to get beat up and do not deserve all these "freedoms" that I am allowed because the crime I did is deserving of death. God has taught me, though, that this thinking is a lie of Satan and as long as I believe the lie I will not be able to excel in my Christian walk.

Practicing spiritual disciplines is the foundation for freedom, but true freedom comes only when we live out the truth we have learned and begin to do what we can to help others get onto the road of true recovery. I think many people fail or make false starts because they are still expecting an instant cure or they think they are unique. It is this failure to grasp the reality of their life and the needs that they have for companionship, love, and intimacy that leaves men and women feeling hopeless.

Society may indeed further and even increase the consequences of my actions. Over that I have no control. Their focus is on my past. God's (and hopefully my) focus is on my present and my future. My identity is in Christ. I am Abba's child and He has already determined the outcome.

There is brokenness inside every offender. We can live, as I did, in denial. We can turn to pornography or any drug or behavior to fill the void. But until we admit that we can't heal unless we confess that we need help and that true healing--lasting healing--comes from a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, we will never begin to repair fully that brokenness. Living in shame and with a dark secret is no way to live. In fact, it's not living at all.

Most of the men I meet in here are absolutely terrified of their own manhood and their actions were an expression of their total fear of adulthood. The answer is not in prison, although just punishment is necessary. The answer is also not in psychology, which teaches that there is no cure, but in honest confrontation and development through the power of the Holy Spirit in a loving community of accountability.

Where there is no repentance there can be no conversion, but it's been my experience that sex offenders often desperately seek conversion and find that God can and will cleanse them. They must daily seek the strength to overcome their particular wound; they must be converted daily. But how dare anyone say that God cannot be victorious in anyone's life. This seems to be the current tone.

God has been good to me, providing me the strength I need to see myself out of the bondage and into a better way of life. Without Jesus and the wisdom in the power of his words for regenerating the old self into the new man, I would still be suffocating myself in sin and destined to spend eternity in hell. God is good all the time. Praise his name on high!

I believe in God and love him but I'm not always sure he loves me--a pedophile! I am gay and a pedophile. Many days I wish I were dead. I won't kill myself but I wish God would take me away from all this.

I am reminded every day how great God is. Some days are a little tougher than others and when they are, I feel God is distant. The struggles I'm having in gaining a home plan are sometimes almost overwhelming. I write letters and get no response, or the response I get is "Sorry, we can't help you."

There seems to be a nearly impossible balance between victim empathy and finding true catharsis for the victimization I suffered as well. Both are critical to true healing and change, but any recognition of deep feelings and thoughts is so quickly passed off by secular psychology and the system as minimizing. The cold hard truth is both sides are correct. Teaching men to parrot self-loathing and disgust about actions will not, however, change a man's heart. Only deep felt healing--balanced against any recognition of the fear, self-hatred, and confusion inside the heart-- as well as true reflection and understanding can make a man not just avoid people out of the fear but truly embrace life completely. It is then that they can learn to live as the men God called them to be.

The mind and emotions are a lot like the weather. I just accept them, deal and adjust, and understand that they too pass and often change. And so, too, it's not about my emotions--so I am content. Everywhere and in all things I have learned that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

What do you think of me? Do you see me as a Christian? Or am I just trying to act like I am?

I have dwelt in the land of self-pity and self-hatred long enough. It is time for me to forgive myself and move on, to focus on working my program and my goal of no more victims.

I have not put Christ out of my life. It's just I'm trying to live it instead of taking part in what passes for church here.

It is important to do nice things for myself on occasion, if for no other reason than to develop a sense of continued self-worth.



Our Prayer Corner

Prayer is an incredible gift we can give one another, for there is no better thing than to lift our lives, hopes, and dreams to the altar of the Lord.

Let us pray . . .

- First and always foremost, for our victims, that each day for them is a new day, a day without fear, and a day of healing.
- For those who are preparing for possible release in 2010, that they walk with peace though there might be anxiety and fear.
- For those who continue to isolate, that they recognize the good people around them.
- For those who struggle with anger over the ever increasing legislation against SOs, that they pray for an appropriate balance in such laws and the creation of laws that protect them as well as society.
- For groups of individuals who meet regularly seeking ways to provide safe and productive aftercare, that their efforts are blessed.
- For all prison ministries, that they continue to offer the love of God to people desperately needing to feel that love.
- For media, that they might somehow come to understand the need to present truth instead of mere sensationalism designed to increase sales.
- For all with age-inappropriate attractions who have not acted on those attractions, that they are able to find the support and encouragement needed to deal with those attractions.
- For those who continue to struggle with memories of broken childhoods, that when they revisit those memories, they see the presence of Jesus and the potential for healing.
- For the families and friends of victims, that they will continue to show support in love or come to understand how important their support is.
- For those who feel hopeless, that they might experience the blessings that are theirs--that we serve as blessings to one another.
- For churches, that the word of God and the example of Jesus opens the door for more and not less ministry to those considered modern day lepers.
- For the students of Wesleyan University's Criminal Justice Class, in thanksgiving for their prayers of support.
- For Bob and Cathie, that they continue to live each day with the same trust and faith in God that they've had from the start.
- For this ministry, that Broken Yoke Ministries continues to be blessed with the financial support needed to meet basic expenses like this newsletter.
- Finally, for those who are still abusing and are reading this newsletter because God made that possible, that they will do whatever it takes to stop the cycle of abuse and harm caused to their victims.

This newsletter is made possible by the donations of its readers and would cease to exist without that support. Please consider a tax-exempt donation to Broken Yoke Ministries, PO Box 5824, De Pere, WI 54115-5824. And if you cannot contribute, please pray!

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A Little Humor . . .

A doctor, a lawyer, a little boy and a priest were out for a Sunday afternoon flight on a small private plane. Suddenly, the plane developed engine trouble. In spite of the best efforts of the pilot the plane started to go down. Finally the pilot grabbed a parachute, yelled to the passengers that they had better jump, and bailed out.

Unfortunately there were only three parachutes remaining. The doctor grabbed one and said "I'm a doctor, I save lives, so I must live," and jumped out. The lawyer then said, "I'm the smartest man in the world, I deserve to live!" He grabbed a parachute and jumped.

The priest looked at the little boy and said, "My son, I've lived a long and full life. You are young and have your whole life ahead of you. Take the last parachute and live in peace". The little boy handed the parachute back to the priest and said "Not to worry, Father. The smartest man in the world just jumped out with my back pack."

