

Chapter 31

Reaching the final goal: the image restored

In many Christian circles throughout the world, the name of John Stott is likely to bring immediate recognition. Son of a consultant cardiologist, Dr Stott once said that his own first word had been ‘electrocardiogram’, and that for a time he had wanted to be a paediatrician. Instead he became known worldwide as a leading Christian thinker, speaker and writer of many books. His Bible studies alone are models of clear explanation and practical application. A firm believer in the divine inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, he applied biblical principles to contemporary issues, including medical ethics. Sharing Jesus’ concern for the poor and needy¹ he lived very simply himself, a major interest being to support and provide teaching material for struggling overseas church and student leaders. He wrote very many helpful books, some of them suggested in this publication as possible further reading.

In 2007, in his 86th year and only four years before his death, John Stott gave his last address at the great annual convention in Keswick, Cumbria. He urged his audience to consider ways of becoming more like Jesus, highlighting his incarnation, his service, his love, his patient endurance and his mission. Perhaps in our busy lives we tend to focus on present duties but, unless we know what we’re aiming at, we’ll never hit it!

We are to become like Jesus here on earth

A friend of mine once asked what made Christianity different from other faiths. There are many distinctions, in particular the way our burden of guilt is lifted when sins are forgiven and, through the sacrificial death of Christ, our broken relationship with God can be repaired. Yet ours is also the only faith that worships its founder as God-made-man, whose Spirit lives in believers to make them as fruitful and gifted as was the earthly Jesus. (See chapters 24 and 25) Ours is an incarnational faith. God was in Christ, reconciling us to himself, and

now the Spirit of Christ is in us, to make us more like Jesus. He works in us to do more of his work here until the time comes for him to call us home to be with him.

Human disobedience spoiled the intended image of God in mankind and even awareness of it. The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to live on earth showed exactly what that intention had been.² If we are to be made like him, then we, too, should finally reflect that same image.

In chapter 22, we looked at a number of pictures to illustrate this further, such as the possibility of developing a family likeness, or the metamorphosis undergone as one life form matures into another. Of course, the incarnation, the 'enfleshment', of Jesus was unique but in a sense, as the same Spirit lives in those who are committed to him, they should gradually be seen as being in the same mould and mature into a more recognisable likeness. Although we must all be very conscious of how far short we still fall, God looks at the work in progress and longs to perfect it.

When on safari in Africa, Matthew Parris (columnist for *The Times* newspaper and a declared atheist) noticed a difference between traditional African people and African Christians, who seemed to him (rightly!) to have been freed from anxiety, fear of evil spirits and more, and were more direct and open with other people. 'They stood tall', he said, and he felt safer to camp overnight near a mission station than anywhere else. His conclusion was that 'Africa needs God'. This was the title Matthew Parris gave his piece and it was an interesting comment from someone who professed not to believe in God at all. He had unexpectedly seen a glimpse of God's image being restored in the Christians he met.

A preview of what lies ahead

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was temporarily changed, dazzling the amazed eyes of his disciples. The Father spoke from heaven that *this* was his beloved Son.³ John's book of Revelation contains word pictures of someone who almost defied description, yet John also spoke of him as a slain but enthroned Lamb. This should

remind us of John the Baptist's declaration that Jesus is the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world.^{4,5} In his revelation John witnessed great praise arising from people of all nations who had accepted the Lamb's sacrificial offering and were now in his glorious presence. In John's first letter, he said that when we see him we shall be like him.⁶ We get an earthly glimpse of this when we see a young child running in delight to welcome a parent arriving home after a day's work, each face reflecting the joyful love of the other. Airports are also good places to witness such moving reunions.

It will be a lifetime before we even begin to reflect the glory of Jesus. For each of us there is always more than a little of 'me' left that is not Christ-like, and does not easily give up the old ways. We (the writer included!) are often surprised by a sudden emergence of self. Like a purring little kitten, all may look good on the surface until someone accidentally treads on its tail and purring gives way to hissing and scratching. We know already that patience and long-suffering are not the easiest aspects of the Spirit's fruit to grow, and self-love so often cuts off the flow of any Christ-like self-giving love. Producing the fruit of his Spirit needs our willing co-operation, and at times an experience of pruning before that lost, intended image can be restored. Yet there is hope ahead.

The refining process

Most people find it easier to complain when life is hard than to give thanks when all is well. Yet as we seek God's grace to look back we can sometimes see how instructive and creative our difficulties have been. At one point in the old account of Job's many sufferings he reached the conclusion that, just as a goldsmith applies heat to unrefined gold to show up and deal with its impurities, so he could see that he was undergoing a process of refinement from which he would finally emerge like pure gold.⁷ Before the gold ore is refined it looks very dull with only occasional sparkles, but afterwards the goldsmith may see in it a reflection of his own face. The last book in the Old Testament, Malachi, includes the same idea.⁸ This puts a new slant on suffering, whether minor or major, as not being altogether pointless. Unlike the melted gold, we can choose whether to complain of the heat or trust God to use it to refine us.

We pick up this thought from Paul when he writes of our having only a hazy reflection of God's loving intentions now, but how, through suffering, we may go on to reflect more clearly the Lord's own image.^{9,10}

We shall one day be like him

Before his death Jesus promised that one day he would return to take his followers to be with him in his Father's house.¹¹ In 1 Thessalonians, Paul describes how he expects this to happen both for those still living and the resurrected dead.¹² As Paul was probably the unidentified person who had once had a remarkable but private visionary experience we may perhaps suppose this to have been one of the insights given then.¹³ He also said that until we go to be with him we are gradually undergoing transformation (metamorphosis) into the Lord's likeness.¹⁴

Keeping our eyes on the goal

Although we naturally draw back from any idea of suffering, yet when Jesus said, 'Follow me', he was on the way to Calvary. He warned against any such turning back once we have started to follow.¹⁵ Later, his Spirit came to the disciples to strengthen and sustain them, even in the persecutions they faced because of staying true to him. When trouble came, the Spirit actually enabled them to count it as joy.¹⁶ With more experience and hindsight, James was another who could say that it is best to face trials of many kinds with joy because they gradually produce in us perseverance and maturity.¹⁷ It does help to count our present troubles as not worth dwelling on in the light of the glory ahead. We therefore learn to fix our eyes not on what we can see all too well but on what we cannot yet see at all.¹⁸ We need to adapt to long-distance vision, even if sometimes the lenses are made from our tears.

Not long ago I met someone whose work had often taken him to India. He commented on the contrast between rich and poor observed by thoughtful visitors to such countries and added, 'Yet despite being so obviously impoverished, I never heard anyone complain. They seemed to have such endurance, as if this had actually emerged from their sufferings'. We agreed that it was rather like the way pruning a rosebush helps to grow more blossoms, a similar thought to the final

effect on gold of its refinement. Obviously this should not make us tolerant of other people's pain without trying to offer relief, otherwise there would be no healthcare professionals or aid workers.

Yet there is a spiritual parallel, for it is in the loving hands of the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort that many of his children come to develop more patient endurance, even through distressing experiences. As we win through by keeping our focus on the Lord Jesus, who endured the cross for us to bring such joyful results,¹⁹ so we find that by needing to be comforted ourselves we have gained more understanding for others we meet who are still in need of it.²⁰ Even so, it is of no help to say to someone, 'I know how you feel.' None of us will have had exactly the same feelings as others but when we have walked through a similar valley and found the comforting presence of our Lord there with us, that is a testimony to be shared.²¹

This positive result must not be turned into a deliberate search for extra suffering, or the foolish idea that this would score more good marks to help us on judgment day. Our salvation is an entirely free and undeserved gift from God.²² Paul had a much longer catalogue of difficulties than most of us will ever have but, like him, we can hope in our trials to show clearer evidence of Jesus' vitality at work in us.²³ God is faithful and will not allow testing beyond our endurance.²⁴

It's not all sorrow and suffering!

Those who mock the Christian faith sometimes call it hoping for 'pie in the sky when you die', but not having much pleasure in life here and now. I must not leave that impression! – for most of those who seek to walk in step with the Spirit of God will already know something of the love, joy and peace he produces.²⁵ There is a great wealth of friendship among believers that is unlike any other, providing a source of love, joy, fun and fellowship with mutual support in more difficult times.

Wanting to become like Jesus

It is a long process for each of us to be made more like Jesus, yet as we co-operate with him this is the aim of his Spirit within us. What a goal

that is! – to recover the image that God meant for each of us at the beginning of time and illustrated for us in our Lord Jesus Christ.^{26, 27} In ways that we cannot begin to imagine, his image will be fully reflected in us when we join him in his heavenly home and are made like him. Other tasks await us there but no more tears or pain.^{28, 29} God's original intention will have come full circle.

Those who heard John Stott's last great Bible address would think how much like the Lord Jesus the speaker himself had unconsciously become as he neared the end of his long life. Yet with Paul, he would have admitted that he was not yet made perfect but still pressing on.³⁰ That famous international preacher and inspiring teacher ended his talk with a simple children's chorus, using it as a prayer:

*Like Jesus, like Jesus,
I want to be like Jesus.
I love him so, I want to grow
Like Jesus day by day.*

Whatever our age or experience, we can add to that our own 'Yes!'.

Am I all that I could be?

Although sin spoiled the intended image in us all, we begin the process of recovery when we ask God's Son, the Lord Jesus, to restore the broken relationship between us. By his Spirit he then starts to refine and transform us until the day when we shall meet him face to face to fully reflect his image for evermore. Until then, like Paul, we press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us.

For further thought

- What a great privilege and prospect we have, to be changed and made like Jesus. Have you met anyone already so transformed that you are reminded of him?
- To learn of their early struggles may suggest a creative purpose in your own.

Further resources

- Steer R. *Inside Story: the life of John Stott*. Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009
- Stott J. *The Model – Becoming more like Christ*. Available as teaching DVD, KESW 009 from www.iccstudiosandduplication.com
- Parris M. Africa needs God. *The Times*, 27 December 2008 available at: bit.ly/1g9A28a

References

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Luke 14:12-14 | 16. Acts 5:41 |
| 2. 2 Corinthians 4:4 | 17. James 1:2-4 |
| 3. Mark 9:2-7 | 18. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 |
| 4. John 1:29 | 19. Hebrews 12:2-3 |
| 5. Revelation 5:6 | 20. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 |
| 6. 1 John 3:2 | 21. Psalm 23:4 |
| 7. Job 23:10 | 22. Ephesians 2:8-10 |
| 8. Malachi 3:2-4 | 23. 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 |
| 9. 1 Corinthians 13:12 | 24. 1 Corinthians 10:13 |
| 10. Romans 8:16-18 | 25. Galatians 5:22-25 |
| 11. John 14:3 | 26. Colossians 1:15 |
| 12. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 | 27. Philippians 3:20-21 |
| 13. 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 | 28. Revelation 22:3-5 |
| 14. 2 Corinthians 3:18 | 29. Revelation 21:4 |
| 15. Luke 9:51, 59, 62 | 30. Philippians 3:12 |

