

The Secret of Steadfastness
II Corinthians 1:21-22

The Christian has big reasons for doing little things right. A simple change in plans concerning a trip to Corinth was surely a little thing in the scheme of Paul's life. But when this prompted accusations that he was insincere and fickle, he responded with some deep insights into the very nature of the Christian life. Being fickle and being Christian are just contradictory. There are forces at work in the life of the Christian to make him steadfast in character, to make his word his bond.

"Now it is-God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ." "Stand firm" means to be steady, to be firm. Just as there is in God a firmness of character that makes His word sure, so He works in us to produce the same kind of firmness and steadfastness. The firmness that Paul has in mind is not the same as stubbornness or hardheadedness that we sometimes encounter. Rather, it is that of an unwavering commitment to Jesus Christ. This standing firm is in Christ! It suggests that this firmness is a continuing and progressive thing. The tense of the verb is present tense, in contrast to the three verbs which follow. This indicates that this work of making us firm is continuous. The construction also indicates that it is progressive. The more of the work of God we know in our hearts, the more steadfastness there will be in our trust and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

How does God do this work of making us steadfast? The three expressions that follow give us the method. He does it through the Holy Spirit who is the anointing, the seal, and the earnest in our hearts. The ministry of the Holy Spirit then is to produce in us a real steadfastness in our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ and a reflection of the character of God in us. Let us consider the three aspects of His work that are presented here.

I. THE SECRET OF STEADFASTNESS IS THE ANOINTING OF THE SPIRIT

The One doing the anointing is God. He is always presented as the One doing the anointing in the Bible. The ointment in the anointing is the Holy Spirit. He is the unction.

The tense of the verb in this case is aorist. This points back to some specific instance of anointing. Some believe that Paul is referring to a special anointing that came to him which set him apart of the apostolic ministry. However, it seems better to understand this anointing to be the unction that is given to every Christian in the gift of the Holy Spirit. It takes place in the moment of conversion when the Father gives to the believer the gift of the Holy Spirit. In fact, each of these figures are to be seen as just a different aspect of this one great event, the receiving of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The anointing of the Spirit must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament practices. Whenever anyone was set apart to some special work, or set apart to the service of the Lord, he was anointed with oil. The prophets, priests and kings of the Old Testament were so anointed. The vessels used in the worship of God were so anointed. The anointing of the Spirit is that which sets us apart of the service of God.

Interesting, the title "Christ" is literally "the anointed one." Does this mean that we too are "Christs"? Not in the sense in which Jesus is the Messiah or Christ, but it does surely identify us with Him. We are anointed, set apart to God by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In I John, we are told that one benefit of the anointing is the teaching or illumination ministry of the Spirit. It keeps us from being dependent upon human teachers and gives us access to inner spiritual insight. It was John's contention that each believer enjoys such an unction from the Father. So the Holy Spirit is at work in our life producing this firmness of character as the anointing of the Father.

II. THE SECRET OF STEADFASTNESS IS THE SEAL OF THE SPIRIT

Again, the Apostle borrows a figure that was familiar in that day. The Holy Spirit is the seal of God upon His people. The seal was used in several different ways in that day. An envelope that was not to be opened would be sealed with the seal of the king. A document that was to be validated would be sealed with the seal of the authority. A piece of property could be identified by the impression of the seal that was placed upon it. It is out of this background that the Apostle uses this figure.

The Holy Spirit is the mark of divine ownership as the seal of God. The thing that assures us that we really do belong to God is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He is within to bear witness with our spirits that we are the sons of God. His presence within also becomes the outward sign of the divine ownership. Wherever the Holy Spirit is, He will be impressing upon that life the image and the likeness of the Lord God. He will be producing a godly character in the person. This will allow the world about us to see the seal of divine ownership.

The seal of the Spirit is also the basis for divine protection. Anything that bore the seal of the king was known to be under the protection of the king. You did not tamper with anything that bore the seal of the king lest you incur the wrath of the king. That which God seals with His Holy spirit, He commits Himself to protect and keep. This becomes the basis for great assurance and confidence with us.

This is a foundation stone in the biblical doctrine of eternal security. The doctrine has never been based upon our confidence in any man to keep himself saved. Rather, it is based upon the confidence that we have in the keeping power of God. It is based on our understanding that God has already sealed us with the seal of the Holy Spirit. This seal identifies us as belonging to God. This seal makes certain that God will keep us safe until the last day. He will not lose anything that bears His seal.

III. THE SECRET OF STEADFASTNESS IS THE EARNEST OF THE SPIRIT

We need to keep in mind that these three figures do not speak to three different experiences with the Holy Spirit. Rather, they are three different aspects of the one gift of the Spirit. When you received the Holy Spirit into your heart in the moment of the new birth, you received the Holy Spirit as an earnest.

The New International catches the force of this, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." The original text uses the word "give." I want to call attention to it because it is a word largely overlooked in the modern emphasis upon the Holy Spirit. This earnest of the Spirit, this deposit, is the "gift" of God to us.

The figure used here is easily understood. When we signed a contract to buy our house a few weeks ago, we gave to the seller some "earnest" money. This money was a guarantee, a pledge on my part that my intentions were to fulfill the terms of the contract. The money was a downpayment on money that was to come; it was a foretaste. The Holy Spirit is the deposit of God in our hearts in the same way.

This aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit turns our attention toward the future. It indicates that the salvation of God in our lives has not been fully consummated yet. The Holy Spirit in us is God's way of guaranteeing that on the appointed day, He will consummate what He has begun. As blessed as the Christian life is now, and it is better than any other alternative life I know anything about, there is more to come. What we know now is only a partial experience of what is to come.

There is also a suggestion here though that what we know now is of the same kind as that which is to come. We are now knowing through the Holy Spirit a little of the heaven that is to come. When I was a student at Southwestern Seminary, I heard Dr. Robert Naylor speak of this in a sermon. He reminded us of an experience that most of us have known sometime in life, the experience of feeling like you have been at a certain place before. Even though you were there on your first visit, it had about it an uncanny kind of familiarity. Dr. Naylor said that he fully expected to have that same sensation when he got to heaven. Heaven will not be all new. It will be just a full extension, a deeper reality of what we

have known here in blessed experiences of prayer, devotion, worship and service to our Lord. Even now the Holy Spirit is imparting to us a foretaste of this blessedness of life eternal. He is the earnest of our salvation in our hearts. I must be honest with you, there have been some experiences I have known in the Lord that were so blessed and joyful that I have a hard time imagining how heaven could be any better - but it will. This is only the earnest that we know through the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

We must keep all of this in the proper context. One of the practical outgrowths of this is that it produces in us a firmness of resolve, a steadfastness in commitment. It produces in us that quality of character which makes us a man of our word.

How it must grieve the Holy Spirit within us when we waver in our commitment, when we are fickle in our ways. Most of us must admit that we have not allowed the Holy Spirit to do in us all that the Father planned for Him to do. Let me urge you to begin now to allow the Holy Spirit to infill, to control, to direct your life so that He may indeed bring about the character transformations that He has come to perform. You will be blessed beyond measure in doing this.