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Comforts from the Cross

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Acknowledgments

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Thank you all. Celebrate with me. We're so blessed.

Introduction

I love celebrations. I love parties and getting together with friends and Christmas trees and water slides in the front yard. I love barbeques and Thanksgiving and birthday candles and having our church small group over for dinner and fellowship. The Lord has blessed my husband, Phil, and me with the perfect party house and “the more, the merrier” is our motto. There’s something intrinsically wonderful about being with others around a shared joy, isn’t there? Give me a birthday party or any holiday party and a houseful of guests and I’m in my element. I know that this kind of ruckus drives some people batty. Not me, I thrive on it. In fact, one of the dearest thoughts of heaven to me is the marriage supper of the Lamb. Sounds like a party. I can’t wait.

Through this book I’m inviting you to join me in a month’s worth of daily “celebrations.” These celebrations won’t center on temporal fetes like birthdays or national holidays or even the Mad Hatter’s “Un-birthday.” Instead, they’re all about Jesus Christ: his incarnation, sinless life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, ascension, and ongoing reign as Lord of all there is. In other words, we’re going to be celebrating the gospel.

I’m assuming that right about now you might be wondering why you would need to celebrate the gospel every day. You might think you already know it; in fact, I’m pretty sure that most of you do. Most of you would be able to clearly articulate the facts of Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection. But this book isn’t about mere facts, although these facts are true and significant. This book is about how those facts are to inform, free, gladden, and enliven your soul every day—when you’re struggling to balance the checkbook, stuck in traffic or in a hospital bed, or just bored with the same-old-same-old. These facts

are so much more than mere facts, and yet, the longer we walk with God, the more likely we are to forget about them. Here's my perspective: nothing, and I mean *nothing*, is more important than Jesus Christ and the gospel, and this gospel is meant to be remembered and celebrated *every day*.

So, here's your invitation: join me for the next month, won't you? I'm praying that the Spirit will use our time together to comfort, transform, and encourage you as we revisit ancient realities and dust off the truths that once enflamed our hearts with first love.

(Oh, by the way, if you're not sure that you're a Christian, I've included a short summary of this really great news in Appendix 1. You can turn there now before you start reading, so that you'll understand what I mean when I talk about being a Christian. Thanks!)

Day 1

Celebrate Jesus

As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:26



Once a month, usually on the first Sunday, we celebrate communion in our church. Our pastor frequently quotes this familiar passage from 1 Corinthians:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor. 11:23–26)

Communion is given to us to help us remember Jesus, and I, for one, am glad. I'm glad because it's so easy for me to forget him. I forget his betrayal at night, his unfeigned gratitude while the crushing jaws of judgment were irresistibly gaping before him. His blood flowed and yet he bent before his friends and washed their feet. I forget that he's reigning right now as the sovereign Lord and that soon he'll shatter the heavens and come for me. I forget all those truths, but the communion service helps me remember them.

In a similar way, I'm reminding you today: celebrate Jesus. Although it might seem absurd to tell Christians that we need to remember him, it's my conviction that none of us thinks nearly enough about him and what he's done. We don't consider how the gospel—the good news about him—is meant to affect every facet of our day-to-day life.

If you are like me, perhaps the name of Jesus does cross your mind, usually as a prayer shot up in haste when the freeway is a parking lot or the parking lot is as jammed as a rush-hour freeway. Does it seem as though the story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection are cherished truths yet strangely disconnected from daily life? Are they kind of like your elderly aunt's jewels that are kept in a safe deposit box at the bank? You know they are there and that you could see them any time you asked, but they aren't part of your everyday life, and you never think about them unless you're in a jam and wonder if she might let you pawn a piece or two. No, our thoughts are generally entangled with baseball tryouts, melted crayons in the dryer, and the silence around the dinner table now that the kids have moved out.

Jesus? Oh yes, I remember Jesus, but right now I'm trying to figure out why my future seems so bleak and why my friends seem to be unconcerned about my loneliness. I just don't see how his death and imminent return make much difference. In the way we speak to our children when they disappoint, the way we celebrate special holidays, the attitude we embrace when our fondest hopes are dashed, the prayer we utter when physical pain engulfs us, we're to proclaim his death until he comes back for us. But how can we do that?

We do that by intentionally focusing our thought on him instead of on ourselves or on what we think we're missing. I think it's very easy for me to focus my attention on myself. I don't mean that I just sit around thinking about me and how wonderful I am (although I'm not above that!). No, I mean that I tend to focus my thought on my Christianity—how I'm doing, what I'm learning, how my prayer time was today, how I avoided that pesky sin or fell into it again. I think about what I'm supposed to accomplish for Christ, and I interact with others on that same works-oriented ground. But this day isn't about me at all. It's about him: his sinless life, death, resurrection, ascension,

and reign and the sure promise of his return. It's the gravity of his life that should attract my thought toward him.

Plainly stated, let me encourage you to proclaim the gospel to yourself today and every day. Our poor burdened hearts are in such need of a gospel celebration. When you fail today, you need the comfort of this proclamation: he died for that very sin. Tell yourself about his death. When you feel overwhelmed by your responsibilities, remember that he is ruling sovereignly over every facet of your life, and soon he will return to right every wrong and relieve you of your trouble. When you wonder if your life will ever change, he wants you to remember that he is coming back and that this life as it is won't last forever. Make a proclamation! Celebrate! "I'm forgiven; he's paid the penalty for all my sin; he's my husband, and soon he'll return to take me to our heavenly home!" You might pray:

Lord,

Cause me to live this day proclaiming your death and your soon return—to others, yes, but also to myself. Although it seems as though I'm going to drown under my burdens, help me to see you ruling powerfully from heaven. You will come for me and save me completely. I can trust that you'll do this because you've shown me your love by dying in my place. Help me understand how to connect the dots between your death and return and my day today.

AMEN

Day 2

No More Wrath

*For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law
there is no transgression.*

ROMANS 4:15



Although my memory is pretty hazy at this point, I do very clearly remember a day when, as a child, my older brother found me playing outdoors and warned, “You’re really in trouble. You’d better get home right away.” Although I can’t recall what I did that prompted this warning, even today some fifty years later, I do remember how I felt: afraid, uncomfortable, guilty. Of course, that scenario has been repeated thousands of times since then. I’ll admit that I’ve frequently felt much the same way as an adult, yes, even as a Christian—like someone was mad at me and I was about to be punished. I’m assuming it’s the same for you.

Yesterday I encouraged you to proclaim Christ’s death to yourself; during the times when you experience lingering guilt or anticipation of punishment you especially need to do just that. To stimulate your thinking, here are a few simple questions: Do you think God gets mad at you? Can you picture him saying, “You’re really in trouble now!”? Do you think he’s a demanding, impatient, angry Father just waiting for an opportunity to punish you? If you answered yes to any of those questions, you need the comfort that only the gospel can bring, and for that comfort we’ll look to the book of Romans.

Here’s an amazing statement, “For the law brings wrath, but

where there is no law there is no transgression” (4:15). The reason that I continue to experience guilt, shame, and fear is that I’ve been a lawbreaker all my life. We all know what it’s like to live with—and break—laws and rules. My mom told me when to be home and how to make my bed. The government tells me how fast to drive. Books tell me how to communicate with my husband and how to raise my children. And of course, the Bible tells all of us what God commands. We live in a world governed by laws. The Bible tells us that God’s law is good, but we have a problem with it. Even as Christians we don’t obey it perfectly, and so day after day we live with guilt and fear of punishment.

Here’s a gospel truth that is just astounding and meant to comfort your guilty, burdened soul: because Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed every facet of the law in your place and then died bearing all the guilt and wrath that was rightfully yours, you are no longer obligated to obey the law as a way to avoid his wrath. God has already poured out every drop of his wrath on his Son in your place. You are no longer subject to wrath, because wrath is the result of transgression or sin, and sins can be committed only when there is a law that has been violated. So now, if you’re in Christ, *there is no law that you can break that will bring God’s punitive wrath upon you*, or, as Paul put it, “Where there is no law there is no transgression,” and hence, no “wrath.” No wrath for you because you’re in Christ, and God has no wrath left for him. No wrath. Not ever.

Do you believe that there is no wrath left for you? That once you are God’s, it is impossible for you to receive his judgment? Do you believe that the darkness of your sin will never be powerful enough to snuff out the light of his grace? Do you understand that all he requires of you is to believe this truth? You must believe that the gospel story is true not just for others but personally for you. Do you believe that God is good enough and powerful enough to conquer all your sin and irreversibly love you?

Faith is all that is necessary. However, not only is faith necessary for your salvation, but it’s also necessary for your ongoing obedience. Responding to his love and grace is the only way to true or what I call “gospelized” obedience, because all other obedience *always* degenerates into penance or trying to avoid punishment. Other forms

of obedience simply don't measure up, because love for God isn't the motive. And if love isn't the motive, your obedience will always be motivated by love for yourself. It seems upside down to say that God motivates our obedience by freeing us from law and by declaring that he has no wrath left for us, but it's true, and true faith embraces it.

To help you understand this principle, let me ask you a few more questions: How do you act when you feel guilty? How do you feel about someone you might have offended? Does your guilt make you love him more? Of course not. When I feel guilty, it isn't long before I'm comparing my behavior with my accuser's, feeling angry or self-justifying, or spending hours in self-recrimination and despair. Guilt doesn't produce love; only grace does that.

Of course, sometimes we feel guilty, and we don't really care that God isn't angry with us. We know we've let our spouse or kids or parents or friends or employer or church or ourselves down, and we just can't seem to get past it. In these times we've got to see that our problem with guilt stems from our pride and from our idolatry of people's opinions. There's only one Person whose opinion really matters, and all the rest of our guilt is just our desire to approve of ourselves and make ourselves happy. Rejoice because your Savior bore even this sin for you.

We're going to spend another twenty-nine days together celebrating the comfort of the gospel, considering how it should transform us, but for now let me leave you with one more verse. Here is Paul again: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). You've been declared righteous because you believe that the gospel is true, that God is *that* good, and that now he is at peace with you. He's made a peace treaty and turned his good countenance upon you; he'll never be angry with you again.

Why not spend some time in grateful celebration now? Here is a way you might pray:

Father,

Thank you that you have declared your love for me and that nothing, no matter what I do or say today, can dissuade you from that love. Thank you that you've freed me from trying to earn your favor and that you'll never

punish me in anger. Thank you that I don't have to worry about measuring up anymore because your Son measured up in my place and bore your wrath for my failure, and now, when you look at me, you see his perfections and say, "This is my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased." Please help me celebrate your grace today and respond in grateful obedience for your pleasure and glory.

AMEN

Day 3

Presented in Splendor

*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church
and gave himself up for her.*

EPHESIANS 5:25



Yesterday I told you that your heavenly Father has no wrath left for you. He doesn't have any wrath left because he poured out all of it on his Son. And just in case you think there is a possibility that you might careen into it again, let me remind you that wrath is the result of breaking the law, and the law no longer applies to you. You are no longer under obligation to try to obey the law as a way of earning favor with God, because every demand of the law has been satisfied in Jesus Christ. His frown has been replaced by a smile, by love, and by an eager anticipation of the day you wed his beloved Son.

In all the kind and loving ways that a devoted groom anticipates his wedding day, Jesus Christ is anticipating his. Here's how Paul describes the work Jesus has done in preparation for that celebration:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25–27)

I know that the focus in this verse is usually on the command to husbands to love their wives, and it's not wrong to use it in that way.

But this verse is not primarily about our earthly husbands. It's about the self-sacrificing love that the Savior has for you, his bride. Listen to what he's done and how he thinks of you.

He determined to love you and so gave himself up for you. He fell as a sinner (though he was innocent) into the hands of the living God. Consider the power of the love that motivated him to intentionally plunge himself into a fiery furnace that burned with relentless wrath, bearing in a few short hours an infinity of hellish misery. He bore intense suffering in his body and soul so that he would be granted the right to have you, a redeemed sinner, for his bride. As the Apostles' Creed says, "He descended into hell." He gave himself up to hell so that you might be his delight in heaven, and he was faithful to accomplish his goal.

He has set you apart for his own pleasure, just the same way that an engaged man declares, "This woman is mine, and though we're not actually husband and wife yet, she belongs to me and I to her." But Jesus is not like a modern fiancé, waiting to see his bride in the gown she chose for the wedding day. No, Jesus has taken on the responsibility to dress you beautifully, too. It's his delight to dress you in garments that befit your calling as the bride of the Lord of lords. Here's how the prophet Isaiah describes this transformation:

He has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isa. 61:10)

He has clothed you in a "robe of righteousness." He is the priest with a beautiful headdress, and you are the bride adorned with jewels—not just a pretty dress but a gown bejeweled with precious gems interwoven with golden thread. When he looks at you, he smiles with contentment and deep affection. He has cleansed you completely so that you are radiant, without any stain or shadow of guilt or impurity. Your wedding gown is just as it should be: glistening, white, pure.

Even though we may recognize these words as true, I know that it's still a temptation to give in to vain introspection—to examine our record, our accomplishments, our growth—comparing ourselves to others. *Her dress looks prettier than mine. She's always so kind and*

I'm so selfish. The Lord must love her more than he loves me. Then, when we focus too narrowly on our sin, we compound our guilt by hiding from Christ in shame. *I'm sure he's disappointed with me. I dare not come to him. I just hope he doesn't notice how defiled I am.* We're like a bride who insanely shreds her gown because she thinks that other brides are more beautiful and then hides in a corner, ashamed, self-condemning, wretched. All she sees is her shame. She doesn't notice that her dress remains as it always was: beautiful, whole, clean. *But I did that again! But I was selfish and angry!*" is the refrain that resounds in our hearts. This refrain needs to be replaced by a proclamation: Christ has given himself up for our disgrace. His blood has washed away all our impurity. He has completely cleansed us so that we're without spot, wrinkle, or blemish of any kind. No stain, no disgrace, no defect. All our shame is gone, and he declares us to be holy. But that's not all.

He has presented you to himself "in splendor." This is what he thinks when he looks upon his bride: *Isn't she magnificent! She's gorgeous, glorious, noble, honorable.* Think in terms of Princess Diana on her wedding day and then let your imagination soar. That gown, that honor, that glory. That's how he sees you. *Ah, this is my beloved bride. Isn't she beautiful?* he thinks. Are you able to see his adoring smile?

As you face this day and all of the disappointments, failures, and vicissitudes of living life here in this defiled world, think: *He won't fail to present me to himself "in splendor" because it has, in fact, already been accomplished. I feel inadequate, dirty, ashamed. He sees me as being honorable, glorious, noble, magnificently beautiful; filled with splendor through and through because of what he's done.* And remember this: you're not beautiful just because you have been allowed to play dress-up with some other beautiful bride's wardrobe; no, he's made *you* holy—spirit, soul, and body. *Presented in splendor? Me?* Yes, "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:23–24). We're not playing dress-up. This is who we really are. You might pray:

Father,

Cause me to have faith to believe that you can accomplish even this. Help me to think of myself as a beautiful bride, not as an embarrassment or dis-

grace to you. As I have opportunities to serve you today, help me remember what you've made me to be. In your love you've completely cleansed me and adorned me with jewels and clothed me in a gown woven with threads from your righteous life. Cause me to celebrate the splendor you've bestowed on me today and let me rest in the healing beams of radiant love emanating from your smile.

AMEN