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## THE SECRET

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Turn on the radio or TV, and within minutes you'll be bombarded with messages called "advertising." Each of these advertising messages has a different look, a different sound from the next one, but all of them promise essentially the same thing: the Secret of fulfillment, satisfaction, success, happiness. "Drink Dipsy-Cola, and really live!" "Do your friends ignore you? Try Charm deodorant, the underarm security!" "Read How To Be A Phenomenon, the amazing new success story." "Sign up for our six-week course, 'The Power Ploy'--it will change your life!" "Find the romance you've always wanted, sail on the S.S. Slopover to the Islands of Mystery."

These messages used to only inflict themselves on you for periods of 30 to 60 seconds at a time. Now, however, if you are an insomniac with cable TV, you can watch 30-minute "infomercials" that will prove to you that the Secret to happiness can be found on an exercise machine, or through owning your own vending machine route, or by dialing up a psychic hotline. Let's face it: Whether the message is half a minute long or half an hour long, it's all a lie. You won't find the Secret by purchasing a product at the department store, cruising aboard the good ship Slopover, or calling that number at the bottom of your TV screen.

But don't despair! The Secret can be found. It truly is available to you. Paul talks about it in 2 Corinthians 2--and we're going to reveal it right here and now! (Sorry, no credits accepted, and no C.O.D.s--the Secret the apostle is talking about is not for sale at any price. It is absolutely free!)

### **The source of our sufficiency**

Remember the five marks of authentic Christianity we examined in the previous chapter: unquenchable optimism, unvarying success, unforgettable impact, unimpeachable integrity, and undeniable reality. These five marks came into focus for us as we read Paul's description of his own experience and ministry in 2 Corinthians 2. Yet Paul also raised an important question in that chapter--a question which I deliberately passed by in order to save it for this chapter. After listing those five marks of an authentic Christian, Paul asks the reader, "And who is equal to such a task?"

Now, let's take that question very seriously. Try to answer it! Who, indeed, is equal to such a task? Who among us demonstrates the kind of unquenchable optimism, unvarying success, unforgettable impact, unimpeachable integrity, and undeniable reality that is supposed to mark the life of an authentic Christian? Who is a consistent model of these qualities? Am I? Are you?

Are you equal to the task of continually, unfailingly, consistently manifesting a cheerful, confident spirit? An ability always to come out on top? A powerful, positive influence on others? Complete trustworthiness? And such a reliable, realistic demonstration of these qualities that no one is ever in doubt about them? What self-help course can we take to learn how to live like this? What product can we buy, what book can we read to find the Secret? Who is equal to such a task?

The question hangs in the air, waiting for an answer. Immediately a half dozen or so possibilities rush into mind, for the question is so important that half the world's activity is devoted to finding an answer. Paul, however, does not leave us groping for an answer to his searching question. In 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 he gives us his forthright answer:

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in

ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

He puts the great secret before us in unmistakable terms: "This confidence is our through Christ! Our sufficiency is from God!" Lest anyone miss the implications of that, he puts the same truth negatively: "Not that we are competent or sufficient in ourselves! No, our sufficiency comes from God alone." Nothing coming from us; everything coming from God! That is the Secret of secrets--the secret of true fulfillment, satisfaction, and success.

### **Live it--don't waste it**

To live in this way, drawing our sufficiency from God, is what it means to be "competent as ministers of a new covenant." He sharply contrasts this way of life with the old covenant, the dead written code, the "letter" which "kills." To live with nothing coming from us and everything coming from God is to live in the Spirit. The Spirit continually gives Life with a capital L. It is this secret which produced the confident spirit that characterized Paul and empowered him to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere he went. The language he used reminds us immediately of the words of Jesus to his disciples: "I am the vine; you are the branches. ... Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Neither Jesus nor Paul means to imply that there is no human activity possible without reliance upon God. Both the world and the church are full of examples to the contrary.

But both Jesus and Paul teach that activity which depends upon human resources for its success will, in the end, accomplish nothing. It will have no permanent value. Men may praise it and emulate it, but God will count it for what it is--wasted effort. Just such a life is described in the plaintive question of T. S. Eliot:

All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to God.  
Where is the life we have lost in living?  
(from "The Rock")

Where, indeed? We are forced to honestly admit that we deliberately waste a good deal of our life in useless dreaming and profitless activity. But not all of it! There are times when we give it the old college try, times when we are earnest and serious and do our level best to act as we ought and do what we should. The results often appear very impressive to us, and even to others, but when we think of our approaching death, it all seems rather vain and futile. It is then we ask, "Where is the life we have lost in living?"

The apostle indicates that the secret of an effective, meaningful life lies in what he calls "the new covenant." This "new covenant" is that to which Jesus referred when He passed the cup to His disciples at the institution of the Lord's Supper: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). This cup, taken with the bread, is to remind us of the central truth of our lives: Jesus died *for* us in order that He may live in us. It is His life in us that is the power by which we live a true Christian life. That is the new covenant.

It is important to understand the meaning of the word *covenant*. There are, according to Paul, two covenants at work in human life. One is the new covenant, which Paul would describe as "nothing coming from me, everything from God." This is in direct contrast to the old covenant, which could be described as "everything coming from me and nothing coming from God." The root idea of covenant, both in Paul's day and ours, is that of an agreement which forms the basis upon which all further relationship rests.

If two men go into business together, they form a partnership. The terms of their relationship are carefully spelled out so they will have a framework within which to work. Marriage is also a type of covenant in which a man and a woman agree together to share all they have and to stick together against all obstacles till death. Nations sign treaties with one another to determine the conditions under which they will work together. All these examples are forms of covenants, and it is apparent from these that a covenant is fundamental and

essential to all human endeavor.

But the most fundamental covenant of all is that which forms the basis of human life itself. We may not often think of it in this way, but no activity is possible to us that does not rest upon an underlying covenant. We could not talk, sing, walk, speak, pray, run, think, or breathe without that covenant. It is an arrangement made by God with the human race, whereby we furnished the life and energy we need to perform what God wants us to do. We do not provide our own energy. We are dependent creatures, needing a constant supply from God the Creator in order to live and breathe.

Now the great thing that Paul declares to us in this passage and which is confirmed by many Scriptures, both in the Old and the New Testaments, is that this fundamental arrangement for living comes to us in one of two ways. There is an "old" way which, as we shall see in the next chapter, is linked inextricably with the Old Testament law of Moses--the written code, the "letter" which kills.

But through Jesus Christ, there is a "new" way which gives life that is unquenchably optimistic, characterized by unfeigned success, makes unforgettable impact, operates with unimpeachable integrity, and confronts the world with a testimony of undeniable reality. It is through having discovered the implications of this new covenant that the apostle finds himself qualified to live as God intended him to live, and it is through discovering these same implications for ourselves that we shall find ourselves qualified by God to live as God intends us to live today.

### **How Paul found the Secret**

Since the apostle uses his own experience as the example of the kind of life he has in view, it will be helpful to trace the way and the time that he came to learn this transforming truth for himself. If you think it all came to him in that one dramatic moment in the dust of the Damascus road when he discovered the true identity of Jesus Christ and yielded himself to his lordly claims, then you are far from the truth. It is true that Paul was born again at that moment; it is true that he understood for the first time that Jesus was indeed the Son of God; it is true that the center of this ardent young Pharisee's life was forever changed from living for his own advancement to desiring the eternal glory of Jesus Christ. But it may be of great encouragement to many of us who struggle in the Christian life to learn that Paul also went through a period of probably ten years after his conversion before he began to live in the fullness of the new covenant. And it was during this time that, from God's point of view, he was an abject failure in living the Christian life!

If we pick up Luke's account of Paul's conversion from the ninth chapter of Acts, we can piece together from several other Scriptures the full account of what happened to produce the tremendous change in his life. Here is a description of what took place after the experience of the Damascus road:

Saul [Paul] spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" (Acts 9:19-21).

It is clear from these words that it all happened within a very few days after Paul's conversion and his baptism at the hands of Ananias. Paul began immediately, with characteristic vigor, to *proclaim* (herald, announce) the deity of Jesus ("He is the Son of God"). This truth he had learned in the glory of the light that flamed about him on the road to Damascus. Then Luke, without giving any indication in the text whatever, goes on in his account to something which did not take place for at least several months after the above events and which may not have occurred for as long as three years afterward: "Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 9:22).

Note that Paul's (or Saul's) message is here said to be in the form of "proving" that Jesus is the Christ. There is a great difference between *proclaiming* Jesus as the Son of God and *proving* that He is the Christ. Luke only hints at what made the difference in his phrase, "Saul grew more and more powerful," but Paul himself tells us in more detail what happened in his life. We find his description of that time in his letter to the Galatians.

## **From proclaiming to proving**

Many scholars consider the Galatian letter to be the earliest of Paul's epistles. Whether it is or not is uncertain, but it is clear that in it Paul defends his apostleship and describes what happened to him after his conversion. He writes:

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus (Galatians 1:15-17).

We learn from this account that what served to greatly strengthen young Saul at this time was that he went away into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. What did he do in Arabia? Scripture doesn't tell us, but I don't think it is difficult to figure out. We need only imagine the shock to this young man's life which his conversion produced to realize that he desperately needed time to go back through the Old Testament Scriptures and find how his discovery of the truth about Jesus of Nazareth related to the revelation of the prophets which he had trusted ever since he was a child.

As a Pharisee and based on what he knew of the Scriptures, he had been convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was a fraud. Now he knew better--yet somehow, somewhere, he must work out the mental confusion this new discovery produced in him. Arabia supplied the opportunity. So into Arabia he went, the scrolls of the Old Testament tucked under his arm. As we might well surmise, he found Jesus on every page. How the old, familiar passages must have glowed with new light as beginning with Moses and all the prophets, the Spirit of God interpreted to him the things that belonged to Jesus. It was no wonder that when he returned to Damascus he came "greatly strengthened." And no wonder, too, that Paul went into the same synagogues, armed with his new-found knowledge, and began proclaiming for the first time Jesus is the Son of God. In the Jewish houses of worship, he turned from passage to passage of the Jewish Scriptures and "proved" (Greek: "to knit together") that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah foretold by the Old Testament.

## **A basket case**

But now things took a turn for the worse. To young Saul's chagrin the Jews of Damascus were not at all responsive to his powerful arguments. Luke tells us what happened:

After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall (Acts 9:23-25).

What a burning humiliation to this dedicated young Christian! Paul had become--quite literally!--a basket case! How confused and puzzled he must have been as all his dreams of conquest in the name of Jesus were brought to this sudden and degrading halt. It was humiliating to be let down over the wall in a basket like a common criminal escaping from the reach of the law! How shameful, how discouraging! Once over the wall, he slips off into the darkness of the night, bewildered, humiliated, and thoroughly discouraged. He stated later that it was both the lowest point in his life and the beginning of the greatest discovery he ever made.

Where does he go from there? Luke tells us immediately, "When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple" (Acts 9:26). Paul's own account agrees with this exactly. In Galatians 1:18-19 he says, "Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles-- only James, the Lord's brother." How he managed to break through the fear barrier to see these two men is given us by Luke:

But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in

Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him (Acts 9:27-29).

It is a familiar pattern. Once again the ardent young Christian is determined to persuade the Greek-speaking Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Once again a plot against his life is set in motion. It is the Damascus story all over again.

### **Get out!**

But at this point there occurs another of those gaps in Luke's account which we must fill in from Paul's own account elsewhere. Luke does not relate to us young Saul's reaction to the opposition he received when he preached to the Jerusalem Jews. But knowing his ambitious and dedicated heart, it must have been one of severe discouragement. At any rate, years later, he mentioned this event in his great defense to the Jerusalem mob when he was arrested in the temple precincts and saved from certain death only by the timely intervention of the Romans. In Acts 22 he tells us, "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'" (Acts 22:17-18).

It is surely understandable that young Saul would seek the comfort of the temple at this discouraging moment. Again his efforts to bear a convincing witness for Christ had failed, once again men were seeking to find an opportunity to kill him, and he had no positive results with which to encourage himself. No wonder he went into the temple to pray. And there, to this discouraged disciple, the Lord Jesus appeared--yet His message was anything but encouraging. "Get out of Jerusalem," said Jesus. "They will not receive your testimony concerning me." At this point Saul began to argue with Jesus: "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'" (Acts 22:19-20).

In these words Saul gave himself away. We can now see what he was depending on for success in his witnessing efforts. It is apparent that he saw himself as the one person eminently who was qualified to reach the Jews for Christ. His argument says in effect, "Lord, you don't understand this situation. If you send me out of Jerusalem you are going to miss the opportunity of a lifetime. If there is anyone who understands how these Jews think and reason, it is I. I was one of them. I speak their language. I know how they react. I understand their background. I too am an Israelite, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin. I was a Pharisee like they are. I walked before the law blameless. I even persecuted the church, as they are now doing. Why, when the martyr Stephen was killed, I even kept the garments of those who murdered him! Lord, don't send me away. I have what it takes to reach these men. Don't miss this opportunity!"

Jesus' answer is abrupt and to the point. Paul tells us himself, "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles'" (Acts 22:21). What a shattering blow! How crushed young Saul must have been! But to indicate how the church agreed with the Lord at this point, Luke tells us, "When the brothers learned of this [the plot to kill Saul], they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" (Acts 9:30).

Tarsus was Paul's hometown. There is no tougher place to go as a Christian than back home. Paul had tried his best to serve his new-found Lord with all the ability and energy he could muster. But it amounted to exactly nothing. In fact, at this point, Luke records a rather astonishing thing after Paul's exile to Tarsus: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord" (Acts 9:31).

The record shows that the early apostle Paul was not so much the dynamic history-changing missionary he later became. No, the early apostle Paul was really something of a "consecrated blunderer"! In his earnest, fervent, good-hearted way, he went about, preaching the gospel, and stirring up all kinds of anger and hostility among the Jews! When this "dedicated disputer" was eliminated--sent away to his hometown of Tarsus--the church finally had peace! It began to grow! Isn't that amazing?

Saul goes off to Tarsus to nurse his wounds, his ego shattered and his plans dissolved in despair. For ten years he is not heard of again--not until an awakening breaks out in Antioch of Syria and the church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas down to investigate. When Barnabas finds "a great number of people [are being] brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:24), he knows help is needed.

In verses 25-26, we read, "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." It was a different Saul who came to Antioch with Barnabas. Chastened, humbled, taught of the Spirit, he began to teach the Word of God, and from there launched into the great missionary thrust that would take him eventually to the limits of the Roman Empire and spread the gospel with explosive force throughout the world.

### **Are you a basket case?**

What made the difference? Writing to the Corinthians many years later Paul makes one brief reference to the event that triggered a line of teaching that would culminate in a clear understanding and acceptance of what he came to call "the new covenant." The Corinthian church had written to Paul and brazenly suggested to him that he would be more effective if he would boast once in awhile in his accomplishments. To this the apostle replied in his second letter, chapter 11: "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying" (2 Corinthians 11:30-31).

What he is going to say will be such a shock to them that he takes a solemn vow that he is telling them the truth, otherwise they may think he is joking or playing with them. Then he tells them what his boast is: "In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands" (2 Corinthians 11:32-33).

"That," says Paul, "is my boast. That is the greatest event of my life since my conversion. When I became a basket case, then I began to learn the truth that has changed my life and explains my power." What was that life-changing truth? Let Paul put it in his own words, from his letter to the Philippians:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:4-8).

The word he uses for "consider them rubbish" refers to common, barnyard dung. What he once regarded as qualifying him to be a success before God and men (his ancestry, his orthodoxy, his morality, and his activity) he now regards as so much manure compared to depending upon the working of Jesus Christ within him. He has learned how to shift from the old covenant (everything coming from me, nothing coming from God) to the new covenant (nothing coming from me, everything coming from God), which gives life. He is no longer highly qualified to be utterly useless but is able to say: "My sufficiency is from God, who has qualified me to be a minister of a new covenant."

Have you become a basket case yet? Have you reached that place which Jesus described as "blessed"? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." To be "poor in spirit" is to be utterly bankrupt before some demand of life, and then discover it to be a blessing because it forced you to depend wholly upon the Lord at work in you. That is where you learn the truth of the new covenant, and nowhere else. We have much to learn yet about *why* it works, but you can only find out *how* it works when you discover it in your own experience.

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