

Discerning 'Life' by Causes and Effects
Pastor Sam Richards
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He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son, has not life.

We can know if we have the "life" spoken of in 1 John 5:12 because we can affirm the truth of our spiritual life. We can affirm the truth because we can know the **causes** of our spiritual life. There are three such "causes": a. the will of God, b. the word of God and c. the grace of God. Pretty basic. We can *discern* if we have "life" by the qualities and properties of divine grace. So I propose a series of sermons on our ability to discern that "life!" This Sunday we will address the "causes," and next week we will explore the "effects." We can discern that "life" *reasonably and scripturally*¹. We shall determine if we are "rightly bred" Christians, or not. We shall learn what, or who effects our parentage. Who is it that has fathered us?

The holy and gracious will of God we name as the first cause: **Of His own will he begat us.** (James 1:18) We are "begotten" to this "life" by divine generation, and that generation is unto life, unto "this life." The Apostle John goes to some length to refute, or deny all other causes: **We are born not of flesh, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God.** (John 1:13) This is an open refutation of biological determinism. The will of God and not cellular mitosis is the cause of "life."

We say, "Not of godly parents, for men may have godly parents, and yet themselves degenerate, and therefore it is not to be ascribed to parentage. How do we explain bad eggs in a good family/pious family. It is not from the parentage, but from the covenant, and God's will in the covenant, that begets a child of God." (p.160) "Nor is it of the will of the flesh; that is, corrupt nature. Nor of the will of man . . . that unless God set us in with Christian friends, and with the blood and covenant of our ancestors, we shall not be brought on (encouraged, or promoted) to live a spiritual life in God's sight." (pp. 160-61) "It is this which God Himself speaks of in Ezekiel 16:6: **When we were yet in our blood, yet God said to us live.**" In the squalling, mess of the newborn, gasping for natural life and on the verge of perishing, even then when none could help us, then God said to us, "Live!" and we lived in His sight." (p. 161) We "live" by divine command, friends, nothing less.

So there is a second, spiritual birth that must be dealt with: **But when it pleased God to call me by his grace and to reveal His Son in me.** (Gal 1:16) Thus may we discern it plainly, "though it be hidden in the pleasure of God, yet it will show itself evidently in the expression of the Christian man. When he comes to speak of the life of his

¹ "The Holy Spirit usually sets forth the causes of our spiritual life, and if we find these causes to have been the work of that life (that work resulting in decided outcomes!)—by which we conceive our souls to be endued with "life"—we may from thence argue the truth of our spiritual life . . . and from thence (we may advance) the truth of our fellowship with Christ (or, the reality thereof)." (Cotton, p. 160)

spiritual estate, they never attribute it to good inclination (by nature), nor to the good instructions of others. But they say, when it pleased God thus and thus to reveal Himself in me, when he showed me myself, when God laid about to find which way to hem me in, then it pleased God to do it, and since then I have lived. (p. 162) That is what we mean by “life” this morning. That “will” is the first cause, His move.

“The second cause of my spiritual life is: the Word of God; the Word of Promise.” Paul writes **the children of the promise are counted for the spiritual seed**—that seed which is elected of God, and chosen to eternal life. “The spiritual birth of us all is by a word of promise.” (p. 163). . . “Every child of God is born of the promise of God.” “There is some promise, which being reported to the soul in the ministry of the Word, is laid hold upon by the hearts of God’s people . . . working that faith in the heart, by which the soul cleaves to such a promise.” (p.164) These promises, for they aren’t necessarily singular, are what the Christian soul is stayed upon“. . . his life is nourished by them. It doesn’t differ much in effect from a word of reproof, warning, or counsel which sinking deeply into a man, riveted, as it were, in place by God, and so, that fixed word, alters the course of their lives. Turn back, stop, cease and desist . . . such words from God bring us up short and, although we may never see it, may spare us untold suffering and sorrow. But such reproofs do differ in kind from a word of promise—only a word of promise brings life and power of godliness. And this is how it differs.

I have an illustrative experience of this when I attended a party as a teenager, and we were “playing” with an Ouija Board. And we tied into a malignant spirit which began to “prophecy” death and suicide among our family and friends in Fryeburg, Maine. I was frightened and so I prayed to Jesus. He responded, saying “What are you doing here?” I said, “I have no idea, but I don’t like this and I want out.” “So, are you done with Ouija Boards?” “Yes, Lord.” “Good. I’ll take care of this.” At that instant, the small glass that was being guided about the board shattered . . . and the lights came on. The spell was broken. *But this intervention did not move anything measurably in the spirit realm! Either I was spiritually dead, or dormant; or too immature to appreciate the grace of this interaction therefore I suggest it was only mind, or will, deep—mostly outward, more was a rebuke—not a promise.*

That spirit’s name was Naomi. Six or seven years later, after a major encounter with God, in my sophomore year, God promised to be with me saying that I had never been unloved, or alone as I had imagined in my despair of life. I was having Sunday tea at the Hamilton’s house in Summertown, England, when the girl twins shared having a similar Ouija experience as mine across the Atlantic. “So,” I remarked casually, “you had a run-in with Naomi, too.” The girls were stupefied, “What? How did you know that?” At that moment I realized that the name was made known because God would use that information at a later date **to bring glory to his name**.

This reset the earlier reproof significantly and it was taken up into a word of promise (“I will be with you, you are not alone”) *and it produced life, and power of godliness—something soul deep.*

We were all still glad that we had decided not to play Ouija any more. It was a parlor game we kept off our lists. I honored the commitment I made that day nearly sixty years ago. Lesson learned—but saved for later to be transformed by wonder into praise and testimony. We lifted up God's concern for us, His protection of those who belong to Him. It became a touch of God.

"We cannot have a spirit of life wrought in us by either the works, or the words of the Law." **He that ministers to you in the Spirit, and works miracles, does He it by works of the Law?** (Gal. 3:5) We must attend to the antecedent of "He" here; this is an affirmation that miracles are **worked of the Spirit, which is Life**, and **not** "by works of the Law." This is a crucial distinction, a vital piece of perspective. **Jesus ministers in the Spirit**, Jesus works miracles and works of the Law are a quite different matter. The Law offers reproofs—still evident in such operations as Jesus saying to me, "What are you doing here?" It is the function of the gospel, or some word of promise however to serve as the ground, or the foundation of our spiritual life. It is crucial in days such as these to think more deeply, more truthfully, about the operations of the Spirit (**works miracles**). "The works of the Law may indeed help cut off from some bad ways. But when it has done so, it leaves us there." (p.166)—meaning, it leaves us in an estate where we would not give offense, either to God or man but without any respect provoking us to either **the glory of God**, and quite apart from **holy fear**, or **reverent fear of God**.

As a further example, the word of the Law, **Thou shalt not steal** becomes a **work of the Law** when we consciously know and obey it. And by this we are cut off from particular sin (say, shoplifting).

The Law regulates, but grace, by the Spirit, redeems us.

However, when facing the same temptation (of thievery) and rather than merely recalling **the word of the Law** (a function of memory, or recall), we are motivated by the word of promise—such a word as, **you are a child of God** and, *our God has promised to meet our every need!*—then it is **the love of God constrains us to live to obedience and good ends**. (Remember Paul's **for the love of Christ constrains us?**) Then our respect/love for God "reaches heavenly and spiritual ends." Yes, what we are mindful of actually elevates us; it makes it possible to act now, out of our **everlasting and future estate** as opposed to being stuck in the merely temporal, the merely carnal. Behaviorally, even observationally, there is no discernible difference in action, I admit that, however, spiritually, there is an immense, unbridgeable difference between reproof and promise: God wants loving, cheerful and glad obedience from his children—not some barren, legal act of compliance. Those who are truly alive in Christ live out their love of God, out of reverent fear, and they enact the **mystery of godliness** with regularity even in the mundane aspects of life. They grow in both passion and confidence, for this recollection of who we truly are (His!) establishes hope and builds confidence.

So while the word of Law may operate to bring awareness, a sense of sin and conviction, "but this is not what makes him a new man in God's sight." (p.167) Just as

reformation of the outward man, and a change of direction in one's former life—the patterns and habits thereof—falls short of newness of life. It is not enough to be humbled by the Law in this manner. *It is the promise of grace in Christ which quickens us!* Oh, the holy potential of longing after some portion of that promise(!), if our hearts are filled with longing for that portion, saying, “What a mercy of God obtaining the portion would be to me . . . if only I could lay hold of that.” As Jacob cried, **I will not let you go except you bless me.** That blessing, that sharing of the promise, actually comes to be our happiness, satisfaction and comfort! Do remember, the salutation of our Lord to the sheep of his right hand, **Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.** (Matt. 25:34) They are already blessed by their partaking of the promises, by being enfolded, adopted, owned and possessed—so are all who are alive in Christ!

The third cause of our spiritual life is “the Spirit of grace.” **That which is born of the Spirit is Spirit, what is born of the flesh and no more is but carnal, but that which is from the Spirit is spirit.** (John 3:6) “There is a shedding abroad, the Spirit of God's grace in the heart of man that makes him of another spirit.” (p.168). . . “his inclination and disposition is changed.”

“For spirit is nothing else but the *inclination* and *disposition*: the habit of it. The spirit of wisdom is a habit, or *inclination* to wisdom.” (p.168) God is into changing habits. **“Be renewed in the spirit of your minds,** that is, in the inclination and disposition of your mind. (Ephesians 4:23) And not only be renewed in the mind, or judgment, or understanding of a man, but there must be a renewal of the whole soul of a man, **the disposition and inclination of the whole must be changed and altered.**”

Example: “Caleb and Joshua were of another spirit. They could judge things otherwise than other men could do. Other men who are not renewed in the spirit of their mind have no alteration. **But the truly regenerate they see a great change.**”

- They never saw the danger of their sins before
- They never judged themselves for their sins before

But now their spirit, and soul, and affection, are changed. And now, therefore a spirit of fear, and love, and care, and every affection is altered.

- Now they are turned off of earthly things
- Now they are set upon the things of God

So, “as he is born of God to a spiritual life,” (he) is become **a new creature and old things have passed away.** (2 Cor. 5:17)

In short, “he has a new mind, and a new heart, new affections, new language, and new employments that he was never wont to do before. Now he can read God's Word, and confer with God's people about the things of God, and can instruct others, and

fashion himself in a new mold, and all upon the renewal of his mind." (p.169) He adopts new habits!

So, beloved, we see now the implication more fully of being **renewed in the spirit of our minds**. God must put a new spirit in us; yes, and a new heart as well—changing the entire man, he is "put into an entirely other frame." **All things are become new!** Yes, the aftertaste of the old man may linger, but it is a relic, a remnant, a lingering thing *but not the main thing at all*. And one becomes aware that this alternation is an ongoing process; always upward, always purer, always better . . . indeed, more and more like Him.

By these causes (the will of God, the word of God and the spirit of grace), we may clearly discern whether God has given you a new life or not. And that is vital information! Can you recollect in your quiet times, the times when you were led astray by the vanity of your mind? Or motivated by hardness of heart. Do you uncover artifacts from the archeology of your past that signify some former allegiance here, habits of or traces of customary sin there? Have you ever made an archeological site of your past? Excavating, exhuming, numbering and listing each piece and fragment, recording and cataloguing? Rejoining shards, restudying and reconstructing the particples of debris left behind in your growth and development? You can do it quite scientifically!

But that **when it pleased God, who called you by his grace, when it pleased God, then it took place.** (p.170) What took place? ***Your summons to life*** . . . your upward call, your spiritual kindling! "God chose to wrap up your souls in life by such a promise as your soul did cleave to"—and then, indeed, you were "born again, born from above, and truly became God's child." New friends, new affections, new desires—symptoms of universal change—"then you are right bred Christians," that is, you are born indeed of God." And you may know it by these causes—and by the three effects which will serve as our topic for next time.

Amen.