

TRUE OF YOU

Recoverers (Part 2) | Ephesians 2:1-10; 4:21-24

Maybe you've had a statistically unusual life. You were born with a character that has only gotten more beautiful with time. You never experienced hurts that left a mark on your heart and your way of dealing with life. You don't have any destructive habits that tempt you or trouble others. You are blissfully free of all hang-ups. In a nutshell, you've already reached your full potential. If that is TRUE OF YOU, that is wonderful for YOU and for US because super healthy people are needed everywhere!

But if that's not entirely true... if you suspect that there are things about your past, your patterns, your personal playbook that aren't fully working for God, for you or for some of the important people in your life... if you ever wonder how you might truly RECOVER from what's gone wrong in your life... then this message series is surely for you or for the person you may know that you'd like to help toward a healthier life.

If you are just joining us this week, you might find it helpful to go to our website in days ahead and listen to my message from last Sunday. I plumbed in some depth the sort of hurts, habits and hangups that are the marks of the "not-rightness" or "ill-health" in our lives that the Bible calls "sin." Sinners are people who do wrong BEHAVIOR because they are in a not right CONDITION. Hold onto that idea because I want to return to it in a moment.

"Sin" is an ancient concept the modern world has tended to reject or ignore for two good reasons. First, because it is personally uncomfortable to face what's wrong with us. Secondly, because talk of "sin" is often associated with finger-wagging, judgment and hypocrisy. As Jesus once observed, the people often most obsessed with pointing out other people's sins are usually not spending much time examining their own. Jesus says that it is much more helpful to begin owning our own soiled stuff and start addressing the unhealthy parts of our own lives.

The question, I suppose, is: How do we do that? How do we begin the process of RECOVERY – the ten-dollar theological word for which is "sanctification" – which means the process of becoming holy or wholly healthy. On that theme, I watched a video this past week featuring Nancy Ortberg, one of our upcoming August Summer Lights speakers.¹ Nancy shared how when she was facing the tough stuff in her life, she mainly wanted God to use his POWER to FIX the problem. Can you relate to that at all? "You've got POWER, God. You can do anything. Heal my hurts. Zap my bad habits. Unhook my hangups." Nancy Ortberg lamented that while God does have POWER to change our lives, the transformation we need most often begins with God giving us his PRESENCE.

It strikes me that a greater experience of God's PRESENCE is exactly what we most need when it comes to addressing what ails most of us. When approaching our hurts, habits and hangups, I know we tend to want to move immediately to a fix: "God, if you

won't fix this troubling thing in my life, then tell me what I have to DO!" But God says: "Let me come close to you and tell you what is TRUE." The process of recovery begins by **recloting yourself in what is TRUE about God and about You.**

Have you ever noticed how many athletes competing for the Olympics or in the major pro sports of our day have these special fabrics wrapped around some part of their body? Usually they are made of some kind of strong elastic material that they or their trainer has wrapped really tightly around some portion of their body that is either already injured or prone to injury. I've talked to some athletes and physical trainers about this. They say this special clothing holds a performer together where they are most vulnerable and gives them confidence to go out there and strive. In a nutshell, these high-performing athletes are clothed in something which gives them a greater sense of SECURITY and HOPE to be their best.

If you want to recover from the hurts, habits, and hangups in your life, you need to think first about what you are clothed in and let God wrap you tightly in the SECURITY and HOPE that only He can give. If you think about it, you will realize that many of the destructive conditions and patterns in our lives (or that of our children or friends) spring from our lack of security and hope. We don't feel truly secure and hopeful, so hurtful experiences really wreck us. We don't feel fully secure and hopeful, so we adopt bad habits to try to deal with our anxiety. We lack a deep security and hope, so we get hung-up on flawed mental models for dealing with our vulnerability.

Many years ago, a young man in his late twenties approached me after one of our worship services and introduced himself as "Jeff." He's long since moved on from this place but I know it is OK for me to tell you his story. Jeff was one of those young people gifted with movie star hair and bone structure. He'd obviously spent hours in some gym. He had a personal charisma that made me think: "Oh, you are one of the anointed ones. You can be and do almost anything you set your mind to." But, as I learned in subsequent conversation, Jeff had some serious challenges from which he was just starting to be a RECOVERER.

Jeff's parents had divorced when he was a boy and Jeff stayed with his mom. His dad was highly successful in a professional sense but spent little time with his son. Jeff's mom drank a lot and went through a string of relationships that made her son's teenage home a terribly unpredictable and emotionally turbulent place. His good looks made it easy for him to look for comfort in a series of torrid affairs that would continue for years. Trying to anaesthetize himself, Jeff started on an escalator of drug use and abuse that sent him to prison for several years. In fact, it was the week after his release from prison that Jeff walked into Christ Church for the first time where he heard a message through which the PRESENCE of God wrapped around his heart.

In the line after worship that day, Jeff asked me: "Does God really love me?" The **SECURITY** Question. "Is it possible for me to begin again?" The **HOPE** Question. And, thus, my relationship with Jeff began. Jeff had a lot of hurts, habits, and hang-ups. You can probably extrapolate them from even the few details I've told you about

his backstory. If you ever ran into Jeff in the hallways here or out in the community, however, I doubt you'd ever guess what he was struggling with. Let's be honest: A lot of us are pretty practiced at hiding our vulnerabilities.

One of the privileges of being a pastor for forty years, however, is that you hear a statistically unusual number of honest back stories. On that basis, I can assure you that you are in the company today (and everywhere you go) of many people who have been through the sort of crazy and confusing stuff that arises in a world where people who have lost their intimacy with their Creator and experienced all of the damage that flows from that. Most people are asking something close to the same kinds of questions that Jeff was asking. Maybe YOU are too.

There's more to Jeff's story that I will share next week. For now, I just want to tell you what I tried to impress upon him in our various conversations. Like you and me as we deal with our hurts, habits and hangups, Jeff couldn't make much progress until he was wrapped in the spandex of God's SECURITY and HOPE. He was SO vulnerable to his past and patterns. Before he could advance in his relationship with people and circumstances in his daily life, Jeff needed consolidation on the inside. And so the focus of my relationship with this amazing young man was trying to get across in my own words and from the Word of God the message which the Apostle Paul articulates so passionately in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus long ago.

If I had to boil down into some key ideas what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 2 and 4, it amounts to this. In effect, Paul says: This is what is TRUE OF YOU, God and this is what God says is TRUE OF YOU, people. If Paul was our spiritual trainer today, I believe he might say: Wrap these truths around your vulnerable places. Let these truths be the spiritual spandex that strengthens at your core the SECURITY and HOPE that enables you to live toward your full potential.

Paul begins his discourse in chapter 2 by telling us one critical truth about us as people: **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** Recovery begins with honestly naming the killing power of sin in our lives. I remember a breakfast conversation with Jeff in which I said: "Brother, you are not wrong that sin has been killing you. Because of conditions you didn't create (the brokenness of your family) and because of conditions you chose (your response to all of that) you've been on a deadly path. But it's a wonderful sign of growing health that you (or any of us) recognize this.

At times, Jeff absolutely despaired over his poor moral choices and his inability to control his appetites or discipline his thinking. He was convinced that God was angry about this and could not possibly still want to help him. Do you ever wonder about that yourself? I tried to impress upon him that he was not alone. We're all part of a society that encourages us to go in directions that may temporarily satisfy our selfish impulses but then leaves us empty and farther away from God. As Paul says: **³ All of us also**

lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. When we keep living out of our hurts and practicing bad habits and indulging our hangups, it does upset God. God, we know that is TRUE OF YOU.

As Paul goes on, however, it's just not the whole truth: **4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.**

What helped my friend, Jeff, make progress on the path of recovery was wrapping around his vulnerable core these truths about God and about himself. "I am a great sinner, but God is a greater Savior. I can be secure and hopeful in life not because of who I am but because of who God is. Jesus shows me that God has a GREAT LOVE for me... that God is rich in mercy toward me... that God has the power to save me from what has shattered and stymied me... that God is far less concerned with who I have been than with who, by his grace, I can become and go on to do." **10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2: 1-10)**

So name your hurts. Confess your habits. Lament your hang-ups. But wrap most tightly around you the spiritual spandex that is the TRUTH of who God is and who he says you are and keep reminding yourself to TRUST it. Step freely into Christ's gravity-beating grace. Step forward into your future, focusing more on what God has for you to do on the journey ahead than fretting about what you did or didn't do on the road behind. As Paul puts it: **21 Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him... 22 throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life... 23 Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes.**

We'll talk more next week about how we clothe ourselves for the new life God has for us but let me close this session with one final observation. The recovery journey isn't a simple one. I wish that when we came to a point of self-awareness about our sin and our need of a savior that the journey toward healing was a pathway like THAT picture. But, in my own experience and that of my friend, Jeff, I'll share more about next week, the journey is usually more like THIS. Can any of you relate? If you heard my story last week, I want to emphasize that it took me a long time to give up smoking. It has been a winding pilgrimage for me to learn how to admit vulnerability and failure without fearing that I was losing the game. There's more I'm still turning over to Jesus.

Our hurts, habits, and hangups are like weak muscles and stubborn flab. We've got to keep tightening around us the truth about who God is and who he says we are. In

Paul's words: ²⁴ **Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy (Ephesians 4:21-24).** For if you keep doing that and some of the other things we'll reflect on next week, one day you may look back and be amazed at how far and how NEW YOU have become.

Please pray with me...

Lord Jesus, as we go out into this week ahead, help us to so abide in you, to live our lives so enwrapped in who YOU are and what you say about and have done for US, that we start to rise above our fears and foibles. Help us experience the reality that your very presence with us wherever we go contains the power to make us new creations. May your love be our great SECURITY and your grace our indomitable HOPE. For it is in your name we pray. Amen.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPTfsdNL4VQ>