

Special Section: Surrender

The Freedom Of Surrender

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Lk. 9:24).

By Gary Thomas



Illustration by Kari Kroll

Mike is a dynamic Christian and worship leader. During a recreational basketball game, he bristled at a referee's fifth lousy call. Mike wanted to tell the referee just what he thought about his officiating. Inwardly, he was tempted to pray, "God, let me stop being a Christian for just 30 seconds; I'll repent and come right back, I promise. I just have to let this guy have it."

At that moment, Mike felt like the call to surrender to God was no less irritating than a horse being reined in by a hard tug on a steel bit. He found that it's one thing to surrender to God when you're leading worship and everyone is smiling. It's quite another thing to surrender to God when you feel you've been wronged.

In 1659, Blaise Pascal faced what may have been his ultimate test. Five years earlier, he had left the popular social circuit of his day to more seriously pursue his Christian faith. He gave up considerable fame and worldly pleasure to begin writing an apology for the Christian faith which, he believed, would take 10 years of good health to complete.

The only problem was, God didn't give him 10 good years. Pascal contracted a serious illness from which he never fully recovered. Pascal could have become bitter. He could have said, "God, I gave up everything for You, and this is the thanks I get?" Since he gave up his worldly fame to serve God, Pascal might have thought that God owed him "heavenly" fame and the chance to accomplish for God what he had accomplished for science. Instead of growing bitter, however, Pascal chose to spend his last days handing out blankets and food to the poor. If

he couldn't use his mind to serve God, he'd use his hands.

Mike was called to surrender his anger and his desire to escape the "confinements" of his faith. But Blaise Pascal was asked to surrender something even more difficult: his ministry. It's one thing to give up our sin to God; it's another thing to place everything else on the altar, as well.

Surrender is both the essence and the greatest difficulty of the Christian life. In many ways, it defines the Christian life. The best description of it is given by Jesus in Luke 9:23: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Before we are born again, we are in one of two states: either we are warring against God, or we are virtually ignoring Him. After we become Christians, all that must change. All of a sudden, surrendering becomes a part of our daily life.

Let me give an example. On one occasion, I read a really stupid comment made by a local man running for office. I sat down in my kitchen and wrote a hilarious letter to the editor. I laughed all the way through the composition, then practically cried when it became apparent that God wouldn't let me send it in. In that instance, ridicule wouldn't have served God's end. The gift God gave me to write was not to be used to tear others down, but to build them up. There comes a time when we must correct, but I was doing so with an entirely wrong spirit.

These are the pinches of faith, the times when life becomes a struggle to relinquish more of our will to God. This struggle will never end—taking up our cross daily means just that. To be human is to rebel; to be Christian is to supernaturally submit. A Christian's heart is a battleground.



Illustration by Kari Kroll

Surrender is an unnatural response.

Few of us enjoy being told what we can or can't do, whether it's by a spouse, a parent, a bureaucrat, or a boss. Surrender is thus an unnatural (or better, "supernatural") response to everyday life.

Why? To be human is to desire control. A controlling person can't even imagine that he might be wrong or that someone else's perspective might make more sense or take into account something he hadn't thought of. In spiritual language, control is the absence of humility: "I know what's best so it has to be done my way." From trivial things like always wanting to drive, to substantive issues like trying to conform our spouse or pastor into our idealized notions of how both roles should be played out, this control seeps into and pollutes our relationships.

God will fight that control, particularly as it relates to Him. He knows we must surrender, and that means He will do whatever it takes to help us relinquish that control.

The Three Truths of Surrender

Surrender has never come easily to me. I'm amazed at how confident I am in pitting my 35 years of experience against God's eternal wisdom. Ironically, I have to fight to surrender. That fight ends with resolving, once and for all, three foundational truths: God is good, God is in control, and God knows better than we do.

To develop a heart of surrender, I had to accept Scripture's truth that God always acts with my best, eternal interests in mind—that is, that He's good. Psalm 25:8 explicitly tells me that God is good. Romans 8:28 tells me that God makes everything—even difficult and sad things—ultimately work out for good.

I also had to gain a new confidence that whatever happens has first passed through the permissive will of my Father in heaven. If God hears the cry of a raven mother trying to feed her young (Job 38:41), I can be reasonably confident that He rules the details of my life. Even if I can't see God in a situation, I know that He is there, somewhere, behind the confusion.

The third foundational truth is understanding that God knows better than we do. We'll exhaust ourselves with complaining if we don't remember that the goodness of God may at times be masked, but only because we don't see things from God's perspective.

When my wife and I prayed extensively about buying a house, we gave God many opportunities to close the door. God appeared to bless the move. Five years later, our house is worth considerably less than what we paid for it. "Why didn't God stop us?" my wife and I kept wondering. After all, we had given Him plenty of opportunities. But one day as my wife was praying, she sensed God asking her, "Have you ever considered the possibility that I wanted you in that neighborhood to minister there rather than to bolster your financial equity?" We thought of the people we have been able to reach, and then asked ourselves, are we willing to surrender to a God who would lead us to make a decision that turned out to be undesirable financially but profitable spiritually? Does obedience obligate God to bless us, or can obedience call us to sacrifice? Think about the cross before you answer that one.

To really surrender, then, we need to learn to stop measuring our trials against our comforts, and instead measure our trials against their potential to draw us nearer to God.

Every second of every day, God is sending His graces our way. By graces I mean circumstances and situations that are designed to create in us the character of Christ and thereby draw us into a more intimate relationship with God. When we define "graces" as God's tools to conform us to Christ's image, we realize that Mike's referee could have been God's man for the hour. Pascal's sickness may have been God's preferred method. God may have been more concerned about doing a work in Pascal than through Pascal.

It's His prerogative. After all, He is God.

Conditional Surrender?

The problem with many of us is that we surrender at first, but then want to take it back. When we "bargain" with God—"Okay, I'll do this, but You've gotta do that"—we treat Him like a used car salesman, not the victorious Sovereign that He is.

When God asked Abraham to make the ultimate sacrifice, his only son, Isaac, Abraham didn't bargain: "But God, could I give You all my sheep instead?" or even, "Could I die instead?" Rather, Abraham immediately responded in surrender and obedience. Genesis 22:3 tells us, "Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey." As a result of his obedience, Abraham not only got to keep his son, but he was promised "descendants as

numerous as the stars in the sky” (Genesis 22:17).

God doesn’t make “bargains.” He’s Lord, and that means He’s in charge. That’s why humility is so vitally important. Humility is the recognition that we see with a finite eye. Even the most mature among us can’t fully grasp all that God has done, is doing, and will do. That’s where faith comes in—not as an instrument whereby we get God to do anything we want Him to do, but as a tool whereby we accept God’s stubborn silence and still believe that He is all good and He is always in control.

Jesus modeled this kind of faith in His prayer at Gethsemane: “Thy will, not mine, be done.” This is the ultimate Christian prayer, a resignation that, however much we may want something, we want what God wants even more.

Tests of Surrender

Mature surrender is a gift, a grateful response to God’s goodness that is birthed in us by God’s Spirit. Regardless of who we are, trials will come. That’s a given. Whether these trials will be profitable depends upon our hearts. Are we going to resent God for allowing them and then grow bitter? Or are we going to remember that (1) God is good; (2) God is in control; and (3) God knows better than we do, so even in the midst of this mess there has to be some benefit?

But how do you know where your heart is? Let’s get very practical. Test number one: How often are you complaining? It is impossible to complain without judging, and much of what we judge has God as its cause, or at least as its permissive architect. Take the weather, for instance, or the fact that our bodies grow old and break down, or that we lose hair but gain weight, or that our hair is too thin or too curly, or any of a hundred things that are an integral part of living in the world that God has created.

Complaining about the little things stops surrender cold. Most of us rarely face the truly difficult, so our spirituality must be built upon the small day-to-day hassles of everyday life. William Law, the great 18th-century Anglican, urged us, “Don’t please yourself with thinking how piously you would act and submit to God in a plague, a famine, or persecution, but be intent upon the perfection of the present day, and be assured that the best way of showing true zeal is to make little things the occasions of great piety.”

We can’t pray, “Lord, Thy will, not mine, be done; but couldn’t you make it a little warmer, and make my hair a little less frizzy? And this cold, it’s really bugging me.”

Test number two: Do you fear God breaking into your life, or do you invite God to break into your life? Are you the type of person who has learned to lay his plans on the altar, even hoping that He will close doors that might lead you in the wrong direction?

Test number three: Remember James 4:7, where James encourages us to submit to God? The next thing he says is, “Resist the devil.” It’s impossible to talk comprehensively about surrendering without touching on moral issues. It’s one thing to be surrendered to God’s overall mission, but what about God’s individual obligations? A willful continuance in sin destroys the character of surrender, which in turn destroys the subjective foundation of our faith.

The Peace of Surrender

The good news—no, the great news—is that surrender leads to peace. Just as rebellion leads to war, so surrender results in peace. And the most delightful truth is that a good God ultimately calls us to surrender to many very good things. We become pleasantly surprised: “You want this? For me? If I had known that, I would have surrendered years ago!”

While the character of Christ, not happiness, is God’s chief aim in our lives, the two needn’t

be seen as mutually exclusive. Many of God's commandments lead directly to happiness. The beatitudes might be seen by a legalist as obligations, but another way to look at them is through the literal meaning of the word usually translated "blessed" or "happy." In a very real sense, Jesus is saying, "Happy are you when. . . ."

The choice is ours—a virtual war with God or a peaceful surrender. Whichever we choose, we will find that God is more stubborn, more fierce, and more loving than we could possibly imagine. His call for us to surrender is unconditional, for the battle over our souls is intense. This is one war where victory would annihilate us and only surrender can save us.

Looking back, I can honestly say that those moments when I surrendered have brought the greatest joy. Times when I rebelled have brought the greatest regrets. In this sense, I count surrender as a great privilege and a gift, something that God works in me to save me from myself.

God offers us an incredible opportunity—to live life according to His good and eternal perspective, or to struggle along according to our fears, misconceptions, and human understanding. If you're drawn to the former, consider the following prayer offered by Francis De Sales, a Christian mentor who wrote in the early 1600s. You might find it helpful to write it down and read it whenever you face a crossroads of surrender in your own life.

I desire, purpose, and am irrevocably resolved to serve and love God now and forever; and to this end, I give and consecrate to Him my soul with all its power, my heart with all its affections, and my body with all its senses, protesting that I will never more abuse any part of my being against His divine will and sovereign majesty, to whom I offer up and sacrifice myself in spirit, to be forever His loyal, obedient, and faithful creature, without ever revoking or repenting of this my act and deed.

But if, alas! I should chance, through the suggestion of the enemy, or through human frailty, to transgress in any point, or fail in adhering to this my resolution and dedication, I am determined with the assistance of the Holy Ghost to rise as soon as I shall perceive my fall, and return again to the divine mercy, without any delay whatsoever. This is my inviolable and irrevocable will, intention, and resolution, which I declare and confirm without reservation or exception, in the sacred presence of God.

If you can sign this prayer in good conscience, do so, and mark the date. Then, carry it with you. When God's Spirit prompts your heart to surrender and you feel yourself resisting, take the prayer out of your purse or wallet and read it, reminding yourself of your pledge to be God's surrendered child.



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Gary wishes more Christians would read the spiritual classics because they speak to the heart issues of our faith.