

ALONE IN THE CROWD



JOE CREWS

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Recently I discovered some very interesting things about a little sea creature that rates rather low on the biblical scale. The unclean shrimp has a most marvelous manner of changing clothes six or eight times a year through a process called molting. Apparently a new suit begins to grow underneath the old skin. By scraping around on the rocks, the shrimp begins to shred and loosen the older outer layer, which soon sloughs off completely, revealing the classy new covering underneath.

At the time of each molting, another fascinating phenomenon occurs. In response to some built-in primitive instinct every shrimp deliberately places a grain of sand in a special place in its head. At every molting cycle the little rock is discarded along with the old skin, and a new grain of sand is put carefully in place.

Because of the unique function of those rocks, they have been named “status

stones” or stones of standing. They are absolutely necessary for the survival of these hardy marine animals. Without them the shrimp would be constantly confused and disoriented. In the wake of surging tides and currents they are tumbled over and over and upside down. It is only by feeling the slight tug of gravity on the rock in their head that they can recognize whether they are upside down or right side up.

In His great love and wisdom, God provided this mechanism to enable the lowly shrimp to keep a dignified balance amid the turbulent elements of its habitat.

Since it is obvious that no shrimp confided these facts to me, you might wonder how this amazing information came to light. Several years ago a marine biologist conducted an experiment on several shrimp that had been placed in a large aquarium. In the bottom of the aquarium the scientist placed steel filings instead of sand. When molting time came, each one

of the shrimp picked up a piece of steel, instead of a rock, and placed it in its head.

Then the biologist brought a powerful electromagnet and placed it over the top of the aquarium. Immediately all the shrimp flipped upside down and began to swim around in an inverted position. The pull of the magnet on the steel sliver was stronger than the tug of gravity, and they believed that up was down and down was up. To make the experiment more dramatic the scientist then brought a shrimp from the ocean and placed it in the aquarium. Naturally this newcomer on the scene was paddling around in the proper upright position.

Can't you imagine the consternation that probably was provoked by the appearance of this oddball in the tank? It seems highly likely that some nasty whispers began to circulate within those troubled waters. "Who does this nut think he is? Who is he trying to impress? Does this

weirdo imagine that he is going to show us a better way to swim? Why is he doing it upside down?”

You see, that steel-in-the-head, wrong-way crowd had no inkling that the recent visitor was really the only shrimp that was swimming correctly. They had always depended on two things to prove they were right-side up—their feeling, and what the majority around them was doing. But now that their status stone had been tampered with, they were deceived into believing a lie on both counts.

Following Feeling or Following the Crowd

The more I thought of that story, the more I realized that all of us are in an aquarium as we make our way through this world. Powerful magnets of temptation are all around us trying to disturb our spiritual balance and turn us upside down. Those who trust in feeling and majority

opinion are easily up-ended by the strong attraction of outside forces. Consoled by the presence of so many others about them doing the same thing, they soon begin to see everything in relation to their distorted view. They reverse all the signs in order to read them better, and develop a firm conviction that they are balanced and correct, while everyone differing from them is wrong. Eventually they see wrong as right and right as wrong. Anyone who goes contrary to his or her perceptions is instantly branded as a fanatic or a critical troublemaker.

This points up one great truth: *We cannot measure right and wrong by our feeling or by what the majority are doing!* We need something from outside ourselves to tell us where the truth lies. Our impulses may be just as real as the pull of the magnet, but they could also be just as misleading. Our numerous friends may be most respectable and religious, but their status stone

could be linked to the same false guidance system, cleverly sabotaged by the enemy.

There is only one true, infallible status stone for the Christian, and that is the Bible. When that Word is placed in the mind, it provides a standard of truth which is always dependable. Every impulse of feeling should be tested by it. The total lifestyle, including words, actions, and thoughts must be brought under the supervision of that one great directional control center. It is no exaggeration to state that most deviations from God's will today are based upon either *following feeling* or *following the crowd*.

How important it is for us to study these two powerful weapons that Satan utilized with such devilish expertise. Both of them are rooted within man's deepest psychological needs. We often overlook the fact that our spiritual enemy has been studying human nature for almost 6,000 years—quite a bit longer than the most

successful psychiatrist in practice today. He has also experimented with our emotional weaknesses, using these to exploit us in our most vulnerable moments.

How many have fallen prey to his manipulative devices? One clear look at our flesh-oriented society provides the answer. Jesus saw it long before it happened and tried to warn his disciples and us about the strength of those attacks. He said, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth into life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14).

On another occasion the Master asked this significant question, "When the son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). In the same discourse He declared, "As it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man" (Luke 17:26).

Obviously only a small proportion of earth's inhabitants will escape from the overwhelming deceptions of the last days

and be saved. A little remnant, as always, will be more concerned about doing right than pleasing self, the crowd, or some other individual. The record of history consistently chronicles the story of that small company of dissenters who dared to reject the comfortable appeal of the crowd. The majority seem never to be searching for truth so much as for a smooth, easy, convenient religion which will allow them to live as they please. To them any doctrine which demands self-denial or a disciplined lifestyle is bad news.

I s It Easy to Preach the Truth?

This is undoubtedly why there is such a one-sided gospel being preached in most churches today. It is pleasant to speak things that are appreciated and well received. No messenger of God is hesitant to declare the precious truths about justification and free grace which require only faith and acceptance. Yet there is another

side of the gospel which is concerned with fruits and good works. It is called sanctification. It speaks of obedience and Christ-like behavior in every life situation. That is the aspect of righteousness by faith which is very unpopular with the masses today. It demands action and obedience.

Are some preachers afraid to deliver the unadorned truth on this subject for fear of rejection and ridicule? Have they been intimidated by seeing other faithful watchmen attacked as legalistic and judgmental? You may answer that question on the basis of your own observations. The example of the prophet Jonah provides dramatic evidence that it is not easy to tell it like it is. No one would welcome his assignment.

Is it any easier to stand before practicing sinners of every hue and variety and deliver the ultimatum of Jesus, "Go and sin no more?" As an ambassador for God, I can tell you that there is a terrible temptation to feel sorry for those drug addicts, drunk-

ards and prostitutes, and to tone down the requirements to give up the practice of sin. We want to be easy on them. We don't want to discourage them with the thought that they must change their lifestyle. At least, not immediately. Somehow we want to keep accommodating the carnal nature just a little bit to make religion more comfortable for them.

Question: Is there any true religion that endorses the continued practice of sin in any degree whatsoever? Is there any statement in the entire Bible which conveys the thought that we should only *diminish* the amount of sin we commit? Can the justifying, converting grace of Christ cover the practice of any deliberate, known sin? Paul declares, "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Galatians 5:17).

If that statement is not strong enough on the subject, read the further word of the apostle in Romans 8:13, "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live." There it is! We can do one or the other, but we cannot do both at the same time. We either live after the flesh or after the Spirit. Paul said, "These are contrary the one to the other." That is plain enough. There can be no sharing of authority between these two forces. We must mortify the deeds of the body or accommodate them. Which will it be? It can't be both.

But let's return to our point about following the crowd. We have discovered that the majority is usually wrong, and that they do not want to be told about their sins. We have also considered how difficult it is to tell that crowd how wrong they are. Right here it seems appropriate to read the words of Jesus, "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your

hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15).

Hazards of the “Highly Esteemed”
The last sentence contains a priceless principle for all of us today. Jesus spoke it to the Pharisees who were shamelessly justifying their unjust ways because they conformed to the acceptable codes of the day. He clearly indicated that the majority opinion would be on the wrong side of almost every question. He already had declared that most people would enter the broad road to destruction. Their views and practices would represent those who are wrong—those who will be lost. Yet it would be held by the largest number—in contrast to the “few” in the narrow road. The shocking thing is that those things “highly esteemed” among the majority of men are abominable in God’s sight.

It is not hard to see the truth of this statement when we look at the principles upon which society operates today. Whether we are looking at dress, diet, entertainment, or educational standards, there is a vast difference between the world's ways and God's ideals. Sometimes we chafe, like the Israelites, because we cannot be like the nations around us, but God has given us a better, higher standard to live by.

Many have marveled at the almost ascetic doctrine of holiness by separation which is expounded throughout the Bible. Why did God forbid His ancient people to mingle and intermarry with the heathen nations? The New Testament writers also make repeated calls for spiritual Israel to "come out" and be separate from a system which they called "the world." Those called-out ones are identified as "the church," which is always set in opposition to "the world." The original word for church comes from two Greek words: *ek*, meaning "out

of,” and *kalleo*, meaning “called”—*eklesia*: the church, the called-out ones.

Why does God not approve a close relationship of His “few” followers with the “many there be” in the broad road? And why does the majority choose to be lost? How does Satan draw them in such masses to follow his program? The answers to those questions will also provide an explanation for the insistent call of prophets and gospel writers to separate from that majority.

Here is why so many have been captured by the evil one: his fraternization scheme is based upon a recognized law of the mind which decrees that we gradually adapt to the people we associate with. The unconscious effect of hearing and seeing their words and lifestyle is to slowly build toward an acceptance of what was once repugnant. The molding influence of such exposure breaks down the moral reserve, and eventually leads to a conciliatory attitude toward sin.

The whole scheme is deadly because the leavening process takes place so subtly. At no point is the collaborator aware that he is being imperceptibly manipulated by the people around him. No danger signals are raised. The conscience bends by degrees toward the new tolerant mindset. This is the way spiritual “status stones” have been altered. The slow shift from Bible principle to majority opinion is usually made with a minimum of spiritual conflict because of the gradual nature of the change.

Survey after survey has revealed how moral standards have been lowered under the deadening influence of environmental input. There is no way to be holy while mingling closely with the unholy. We cannot expose the mind constantly to abominations without suffering the consequences. The Spirit of God made no mistake in urging separation from the world of the flesh. Even prayer and Bible study cannot continue to protect against a presumptuous

choice to watch alluring sinful scenes and listen to corrupting words and sounds.

The Fallacy of Following Feeling

Surely we can now better understand why the lesson of the shrimp is important for us to understand. It is never safe to follow the crowd. But now let's look at the second dangerous consequence of a faulty status stone. The shrimp trusted in feelings which were produced by powerful outside forces working on the status stone. Obviously these feelings were inaccurate and undependable because the stone in its head had been changed.

Mark it down well: it is no safer to follow feeling than it is to follow the crowd. No matter how secure the shrimp felt about the tug of that magnet, it led him to act wrongly and make a fool of himself. Satan would be delighted to lead every one of us into doing the same thing. He has already done it to the majority by causing them

to trust some other “stone of standing” than the Word of God. Using the powerful magnet of a glamorous, glittering society, Satan has created some very pleasurable but deceptive feelings. Millions have been lured into a state of false security in which they feel ridiculously overconfident and safe. It is almost as though they have been hypnotized and are obeying the will of some other mind than their own.

Does most of the world actually operate under a trance condition brought on by Satan’s hypnotic powers? None can doubt the ability of mind scientists to produce such a state in almost anyone who will look at them or listen to them. There is always some point of contact used in putting a subject under hypnosis. Attention must be focused upon a light or some other object as well as the words which are being spoken. Without this deliberate attentiveness no one can be brought under the power of the hypnotist.

Does Satan have to get a similar attention in order to bring anyone under his control? He also uses a point of contact, usually an indulged weakness, an appeal of the flesh, or some other area of temptation. Our only safety is to never allow ourselves to watch or listen to his appealing attention devices.

When feelings become the criteria of testing truth, an unreasonably defensive attitude is generated. The most sincere people are convinced beyond all question that they are right and everyone else is totally wrong. In the secure comfort of their subjective feeling they resist all logic or reason based on objective truth outside themselves.

Can such feeling or moods be dangerous for a Christian? Indeed, Satan uses them to destroy the ability to act rationally. Suppose you are seated in a small room with no ventilation. An oil-burning stove has been consuming the oxygen for some time. Gradually you become so drowsy

that your brain is barely able to think. You do not feel like moving from your chair. Especially, you do not feel like getting up to open a window or a door. Yet your feeling against moving is a danger sign that you must make yourself act immediately to get more oxygen into the room or you will never move again.

Have you ever been in the mood not to pray, or not to read your Bible? Of course you have. So have I. Should we yield to that feeling? Listen, prayer is the breath of the soul just as oxygen is the breath of the body. Our mood not to pray and study is a signal that we had better make ourselves do it quickly because our spiritual life is being threatened. That is the time to force ourselves into the closet, onto our knees, and as we pray, the spiritual desires begin to return. Very soon prayer is restored as a joyful, fulfilling privilege. But unless we break the hypnotic spell of Satan's "feeling" trap by acting against his point of contact, we are

placed in great spiritual jeopardy. The truth is that we must act or be acted upon.

Acting or Reacting
This brings us to the fantastic realization that every single one of us is either living a life based upon acting or reacting. We make our own independent decisions about the kind of life we will live or else we simply react to the way other people treat us. In the latter case we turn the direction of our life over to someone else and allow them to determine the kind of person we shall be.

Please take note that we are still talking about Satan's manipulation of our feelings, but in this case he is working through some other person to exercise his control. It is likely that no one is beyond being influenced to some degree by the actions of others, but the vast majority are actually the pawns of whatever circumstances happen to develop around them. Instead

of basing their most important decisions upon deliberative reason or prayer, they impulsively strike out in any or all directions, depending on the way their emotions have been stirred by others.

Dr. Hunter was an English heart surgeon who was himself afflicted with coronary disease. One day he commented to a colleague, "My life is in the hands of any rascal who chooses to annoy me." His self-prophecy proved to be true. Later on someone dealt with him in a manner that made him furious, and he dropped dead of a heart attack. What an illustration that education and high intelligence cannot protect us from the folly of our fallen human nature! All his honorable degrees of learning did not give Dr. Hunter control of his own spirit. He literally allowed another individual to make the decision as to whether he would live or die.

But the doctor's mistake is minuscule compared to that of those who let others

actually determine their eternal destiny. All around us every day we observe the dreadful playing out of an unnecessary drama, and often church members are involved in it. People permit their volatile emotions to surge out of control in retaliation for the way they are treated, and some of the darkest sins are recorded against them in the books of heaven. Many will lose their souls because they refuse to assume the responsibility for their own course of action. In fact, they don't act at all; they merely react. We can say without reservation that those who do not lay hold of divine power to live a disciplined, controlled life will be ruled by Satan, either directly or indirectly. Not one person has that kind of strength within himself. The ability to control one's own life by resisting every provocation of both friends and enemies must come from God's grace within.

The real secret of protection from reacting is found in Paul's counsel to the Philippians, "Let this mind be in you which

was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). No one can strike back if he is thinking thoughts of Jesus. On the cross Christ gave no sign of vengeance, irritation, or retaliation. His prayer was, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Is that state of mind accessible to men in the flesh? Indeed, Jesus possessed the same fallen human nature that all children inherit from their parents. Yet He never reacted to a single needling rebuff or insult. The kind of serenity that He exhibited is promised to every believing child of God who will claim it in faith. Paul declared in 2 Corinthians 10:5, “Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” Let no one believe that this kind of integration with the thoughts and mind of Christ can come without both struggle and surrender. The character is conformed to the

divine pattern by two things operating in conjunction with the Holy Spirit—man's will and man's actions. God will never do these two things for us. Each person must make the decision to turn from sin, and then he must begin to act against the sin. Neither of these steps would be effective were they not accompanied by the enabling power of the Spirit. No man has the power to stop reacting in anger to the way he is treated, but he does have the power *to choose* to stop reacting. He also has the ability to start resisting the impulse to react. Do those two steps bring the victory? Indeed, when taken after claiming the promised deliverance, they provide dramatic evidence of true faith. And faith, in turn, moves the omnipotent arm of God to intervene with shattering force against the practice of any sin.

Dealing with Offenses

Along with faith it is also very important to develop a philosophy of understanding toward those who may seem to be giving offense. Much of the problem stems from an unwillingness or inability to consider why that person is acting in such a manner.

It is a demonstrated fact that our own attitude toward the offender determines to a large degree how we react to what he does against us. Unfortunately there is very little inclination to be thoughtful and reasonable when one is under physical or verbal attack. Impulsive anger takes control, and we strike out blindly in self-protection. Were we capable of keeping on top of those oversensitive feelings it would give us time to ask and answer a few questions about the other person's motives. Even a few moments of rational thought could suggest the possibility that the offender might be operating under false in-

formation and be very sincere in what he is doing. This could certainly ameliorate our own reactions toward him.

Years ago I heard a story which has been such an inspiration to me that I have shared it often throughout my ministry. Many times I have needed to tell myself the story again to help ease through some especially difficult time of personal stress. It concerns an old Greek philosopher by the name of Philip who was walking along the street with a friend one day. It so happened that an enemy of Philip was watching him approach from an overhead window. As the two passed by he threw a bucket of water onto the wise old man. Without the slightest reaction to the outrage, Philip continued his conversation as though nothing at all had happened. His friend stopped and offered to help him find and punish the man who had treated him so rudely. Philip quietly replied that no one had done him any wrong. The friend re-

monstrated in amazement, "But the man threw water all over you. You are soaking wet." "No," replied the philosopher, "you are mistaken. He did not throw any water on me. He threw it on the man he thought I was."

What an attitude! And what a world of difference it would make if everyone had such a spirit of selfless regard for the feelings of others. Most of the personal alienations, racial problems, and international disputes could be settled in a moment if everyone practiced the philosophy of Philip.

Some time ago I was preparing a young mother for baptism. As I visited her for a final review of the doctrines of the church, she suddenly burst into tears. "I can't be baptized," she cried. "Last night my mother visited me and reminded me that since I hate my brother it would not be right to enter into baptism." Under my gentle prodding, Carol agreed to share for the very first time why she had hated her only

brother for all those years. Not even her mother knew the reasons behind that bitter spirit. When she was seven years old her teenage brother began to force her sexually and threaten her if she ever told anyone. For eight years she suffered unimaginable abuse at the hands of that cruel brother.

I could truly understand Carol's festering anger and hatred toward her brother. I was overwhelmed by her justified sense of being dehumanized and demeaned. How could I say anything that could possibly change her feelings over those deep psychological pains and scars? Then I remembered the story of the old Greek philosopher. After sharing it with her, I asked for more information about that despised brother. Was he ever a Christian? "No," said Carol, "he was the opposite of a Christian. He seemed always to be under the control of devils, and he's still the same way."

I said, "Carol, isn't it a tragedy that your brother never knew the power of God's

grace in his life? He was indeed controlled by Satan in all he was doing. Without God in his life there was no chance for him to resist the things Satan was doing through him. He was manipulated and used by the devil. If only he had known the Lord Jesus, he would never have been that way. He would have treated you with love and respect. Now you tell me that he is still not a Christian. He is still being forced to do evil things and has no power to resist. What a difference it would make if he could learn about Jesus and accept Him. He would have the same joy you have found in Christ. We need to pray for him, Carol, that somehow he can get out from under this evil power that has been using him.”

As I talked the tears began to flow again, but this time they were tears of sorrow and compassion for a lost brother who was more to be pitied and prayed for than to be hated. Carol ended up on her knees that day, asking God to save her brother

from his miserable captivity to Satan's power. Her own personal hatred was washed away in those tears, and the next day I had the joy of seeing the old Carol buried in the watery grave. Her life was transformed when she began to realize that her brother did not even know her—not really. If he had been sensitive to her as a person, he would not have treated her that way. His understanding was distorted by sin.

Can we believe the same thing about people who mistreat us along the road of life? Would they act the same way if they fully understood what they were doing? Can't we assume that they don't really have the full information about us, about our feelings, and who we really are? If only we could give them the benefit of that doubt and say, "They didn't do it to the real me. They did it to the person they thought I was." Then we can feel sorry for them, because they don't know any better. And best of all we can even begin to pray for them.

So we are brought back again to the two great lessons taught by the shrimp who have rocks in their heads. We cannot measure what is right and wrong by our subjective feelings or by what the majority are doing. Our stone of standing must be the Word of God. Regardless of the crowd, regardless of our moods or feelings, regardless of the way people treat us, we must choose to order our lives on the basis of divine principle. Like Paul we say, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. And the life I now live, I live by the faith of him who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).



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