

Kingdom Living Today

Illustrating the WAY of God's Kingdom for a Modern World

19. The Love-based Anguish of Belonging to Jesus

“UNTIL YOU ARE WITH ME FOREVER, MY HEART IS FILLED WITH ANGUISH LIKE A WOMAN EAGERLY AWAITING THE BIRTH OF HER CHILD. ONLY WHEN YOU ARE WITH ME WILL MY ANGUISH BE OVER.”

As Keisha poured a second round of coffee, her face shone with joyous pride as her husband sat among the men who regularly met with Jack at the restaurant.

“I bet Jerome doesn’t get his coffee poured like this at home,” Jack commented teasingly as she filled her husband’s cup.

“Only on his death bed,” was the server’s snappy response as everyone chuckled. For some “divine” reason there were few customers that morning so Keisha had a chance to sit in a booth near the men and overhear their conversation.

Harry spoke up first. “Jan and I have noticed that you bear a lot of emotional burden, Jack, as you render account to our Lord for each of us.^(Hebrews 13:17) I think we all can feel your deep love as you serve us as a biblical shepherd.”^(1 Peter 5:2)

“I know what you mean, Harry. Sometimes I’ve felt that kind of heart burden you’re talking about,” Brett added earnestly. “It’s a little hard to describe, but it’s a passion that’s fueled my own concern for my family.” The young man paused as he pictured his cherished wife and two children. “My love for them has grown so much deeper since I’ve yearned to live as Jesus would. I guess I’d say I’m willing to bear whatever pain or inconvenience I need to so I can love them as He would.”

Juan, whose battle wounds were almost healed, nodded. That was a new thought to him but something that sounded like what he needed for his own little family. Jerome and Harry agreed with Brett’s observation as well.

Jack was delighted, not only by their fervent response but also that he himself had role modeled a character quality they so avidly wanted to acquire. “Guys, what Brett’s describing is called ‘anguish,’ the kind of deep concern you have for people you genuinely love.”

The others riveted their attention on Jack as he continued, “Love-based anguish is a work in your character that only the Spirit of Christ in you can produce. It’s is one of those qualities that makes us more like Him.”^(1 John 4:17)

“I know I’ve used that word before. I guess I thought of anguish as something to avoid,” Jerome interjected. “But the way you’re explaining it has great meaning for us in following Jesus.”

“It sure does,” Jack responded. “Let me explain. There’s a negative kind of anguish that’s caused by fear of how something might turn out, such as going in for a biopsy or a boy awaiting his Dad’s discipline for disobedience.” The others nodded they understood as Jack spoke. “This is ‘fretting’ rather than the anguish which prompts you to act on someone else’s behalf. The Bible tells us that fretting, which is really fear and worry, only leads to evil.”^(Psalms 37:8)

Juan's face lit up. "I'm reminded of some of Jesus' warnings to not fret about the future, or about what we wear or eat."(Matthew 6:25-34)

Turning to the young believer, Jack replied, "That's right, Juan. The fretting side of anguish is often a sign that we don't trust our heavenly Father to keep His promises, or that we've forgotten just how sovereign He is over everything." He smiled at the attentive faces as he proceeded. "On the other side of the spectrum is love-based, holy anguish—the emotional pain we bear for others because we care so much. That kind of anguish has many causes."

"What do you mean?" Brett asked, ever willing to learn from the man he respected so much.

"For example," Jack looked pointedly at each man, "I love each of you as a shepherd, so I anguish over each one of you making it through the narrow gate.(Luke 13:24) If any of you were to hold on to unconfessed sin and refuse to repent, you can be sure I'd follow our Lord's instructions in Matthew chapter 18."(18:15-18) Then he noted gently, "But like the prodigal son's father longing for his return, my heart would be burdened for you to repent and return to fellowship in Christ."(Luke 15:20)

Harry's words reflected the heart of each man sitting there. "I think we all believe that would be your response, Jack. And, you'd also make sure none of us held anything against him for having strayed."(2 Corinthians 2:6-9) He looked with appreciation at the older man who loved them all so much. "I know that you'd encourage us to keep on praying and fasting, *anguishing* if you will, until that person was restored to our fellowship family."

Jack couldn't hold back his tears as the men nodded their agreement. No one noticed Keisha wiping her eyes in the booth nearby.

"I think the model of holy anguish for us all," Jack stated quietly as he wiped his nose, "is when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.(Matthew 26:38-42) I don't think He was fearing His approaching death as much as experiencing the pain of leaving those He loved so He could fulfill His Father's will to atone for all mankind." He paused as he recollected, "I've felt a little of this kind of anguish when I had to leave Dee years ago and head off to war."

Juan well understood what Jack was talking about. "I found out yesterday that I'm being returned to my unit in Afghanistan in three weeks. Not only leaving my family is going to be hard, but leaving you guys is making it all the harder."

Several of the men put their hand on Juan's shoulder in caring empathy.

"Love-based anguish is what separates a follower of Jesus from a nominal Christian who goes through religious motions but lives like an unbeliever,"(Proverbs 18:24) Jack observed. "We who follow Jesus as Lord of our lives anguish over our relationship with our Father. We're emotionally sensitive to the hurt our sins cause Him as well as how we've pained others."(Ephesians 4:30-32)

"So what you're saying," Harry broke in, "is that instead of just acknowledging we've done something wrong, we grieve that we violated a relationship with Someone we love so much."

"That's true, Harry."

Jerome's spirit was being deeply stirred. "Does that kind of love translate into anguish in our hearts for others to embrace our Father's Covenant?"(Romans 9:2,3)

"I bet there's something behind your question, Jerome," Jack responded kindly.

"Would you mind if Keisha joins us for a second?" They all turned to invite her over. As she stood behind her husband's chair making sure she wasn't needed elsewhere Jerome continued, "Since my father contacted me this past weekend after all these years, I've developed this intense burden for all my black brothers to be free of demonic strongholds. That's their real enslavement!" he exclaimed with passion. "It's like my heart won't ever be at rest until I do something about it!"

Keisha jumped in with equal ardor. "I've been on the phone a lot lately with both of my sisters—they still live in the poverty section of Cleveland where we grew up. Until they went through the *Demolishing Strongholds* workbook I sent them," she added with remembered pain, "they'd been filled with hatred! And not only for our own absentee father, but also toward their ex-husbands."

"It seems like the Spirit of Jesus has stirred both of you to take on His anguish over the souls of others," Jack affirmed helpfully.

"He really has," Jerome rejoined with appreciation. "In fact, Keisha's sisters have gotten permission from the authors to rewrite an inner-city version of *Demolishing Strongholds* so it'll better speak to the hearts of their neighbors."

Keisha broke in, "We found out the authors readily allow people to adapt the materials on their website to meet the needs of a particular audience. So we're going to help write a version that people raised in poverty can better understand. My sister, Patrice, is taking the lead in this."

"That's not all," Jerome grinned as his wife squeezed his shoulder and headed off to greet new customers. "In order to secure a base of operations, Patrice and her other sister are going around their neighborhood in the Name of Jesus giving the demons eviction notices!"(Mark 16:17)

"Let's all keep them in our prayers," Jack asserted soberly as he looked at each man. "You and Keisha keep us updated on how things are going and if there's anything we can do to help."

Building off the conversation Harry broke in, "I can see how after someone is truly free of strongholds, their hearts are changed. Now, instead of anger or vengeance I have deep compassion toward people who've hurt me or let me down." He smiled in gratefulness to His Lord at work in him. "Those critical feelings have been replaced by anguish of wanting them to experience the same freedom and love of Jesus I've come to know."(John 8:36)

"That's it exactly!" Jerome answered, recognizing the truth of Harry's words. "I grieve in my heart for other black men now, whereas I used to think, 'They have their problems and I have mine.' Now I feel like I can't stop until they're free too!"

Brett was disturbed by how little anguish he'd had in his own religious life. "Jack, why don't we see more Christians anguishing with the intensity we're feeling?"

"There are several reasons," Jack responded. "The first is the shallowness of the false gospels that are so pervasive today. NONE point the way to the Covenant union our heavenly Father offers us in Jesus." He went on earnestly, "By embracing His Covenant, we enter an intimate relationship that calls for intense *love* and *trust*. We're also commanded to *forgive everyone*.(Matthew 6:15) This last point is the major hindrance that keeps many from being sealed by our Father with the Holy Spirit."

Harry added wryly, “Most counterfeit gospels aim at ‘getting people saved’ or what many call ‘fire insurance’. If that’s the case, why would anyone anguish over anything when they’re guaranteed heaven by agreeing with a couple Bible verses?”

Jack had more to share. “During our pilgrimage to our salvation, another type of anguish occurs. Sanctification—our growth into Christ’s likeness—causes holy anguish as we deliberately choose to resist our old sin nature and take on the character of Jesus in some area.^(1 Peter 1:14-16) We want to be like Him so much that we anguish—not over what we give up but over our hunger to please Him.”^(Romans 12:1,2)

“That captures how Keisha and I feel!” Jerome declared. “We love Jesus so much we feel His pain over the lost.^(Luke 13:34) That holy anguish helps us understand the hurt He felt, and we want to bear that on behalf of others as well.”^(1 Peter 2:21)

“That’s wonderful that you’re embracing the anguish the Spirit of our Lord has given you,”^(Romans 8:16,17) Jack smiled from his shepherd’s heart. “The anguish of love is a compelling force that impels you as Jesus burdens you concerning the well-being of others, especially for their eternal destiny.^(2 Corinthians 5:18-21) In fact,” he added, “Christlike love and the emotional pain of anguish should be the hallmark of our motives as we serve Him.”^(2 Corinthians 5:14,15)

Their time together ended in praise and prayer. Something had solidified in their hearts. “Seek *first* His Kingdom” had a whole new depth of meaning to each man.

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“Maya, I’m so glad your parents let you spend the night with me,” Kelsey laughed as Jerome and Keisha’s daughter set her overnight bag down in the bedroom.

“I am too!” responded the ten-year-old, a year senior to Kelsey. “Ever since my parents decided to follow Jesus wholeheartedly, I found I don’t have many friends anymore.”

“I know what you mean,” Kelsey quipped. “It’s not like you want to reject them. But the movies and other things we use to think were all right aren’t anymore.”

“Yeah,” Maya retorted. “I’m still having a tough time obeying my parents in this,” the young girl shared as she walked around the bedroom noticing what Kelsey had. “I don’t think I’ve gotten hold yet of the faith they have. So far it seems like a bunch of new rules being dropped on me.”

Kelsey chuckled at her new friend. “I was like that until I decided to get on my knees and ask Jesus to reveal Himself to me. I didn’t want to be fighting my parents over the new things they were expecting of me.”

“So what happened?” Maya eyeballed Kelsey curiously.

“It’s a little hard to explain. One night as I was praying, I felt this Presence around me. I didn’t hear a word but I knew I wanted to belong to Jesus. From that day I began to ask my Dad how to make this real. He took me through an article called the *Gospel of the Covenant*.”

“Kelsey, would you pray with me the way you prayed?” Maya asked sincerely. “I don’t want to be left out. I know there’s something different about you and I want it.”

The two girls prayed, unaware of the applauding hosts ^(Hebrews 12:1) who were watching the humility of the moment when someone wants Jesus more than anything.^(Matthew 13:44-46) A holy anguish filled their young hearts as this one desire began to consume them.

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