

Running Naked

“They ran out of the house naked” Acts 19:16

Scripture quotations are taken from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

Perhaps only the seriously deviant relish the idea of running out of the house naked. For most of us, even the thought is an alarming nightmare! Interestingly, the words naked or nakedness appear close to 100 times in Scripture, spread out from Genesis to Revelation. It is a very vivid and emotive word that is used **figuratively** to great effect. Sometimes it is used in a positive sense to convey sexual intimacy, realism or transparency (Leviticus 18:16; Hebrews 4:13). It is also used in a negative sense to convey the ideas of poverty, not protected, aloneness, defeat or exposed shame. To Nineveh Nahum prophesies: “I am against you,’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame” (3:5).

But the term is also used in a **literal** sense. We know that Adam and Eve initially lived naked. They were in a state of innocence. We read of a man without clothes who lived in a cemetery. He was demon-possessed (Luke 8:27). Yet we may become a little concerned when reading that king Saul “stripped off his clothes, and prophesied, himself also, before Samuel, and lay down naked all that day and all that night” (1 Samuel 19:24 DBY), or that prophet Micah informed that he would “go about barefoot and naked” (Micah 1:8) or that, as a vivid prophetic statement, the Lord Himself asked Isaiah to walk around naked for 3 years (Isaiah 20:2,3 DBY). These are literal expressions but must be understood within their context. The word translated naked can also mean “in underwear only” or “scantily or poorly dressed”. Their behaviour would clearly attract public attention, but would not be considered immoral. The following 5 situations provide some useful lessons:

1. Freedom from Shame

“And the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” Genesis 2:25. This was God’s initial design. Yet we sinned, our eyes were opened, and our naked lifestyle became a cause of shame. Shame led to fear, and we felt the urge to cover and to hide. Shame and fear have become tools in Satan’s hands to cripple and paralyze God’s redeemed people. We are concerned with our image. We fear others may find out that we are not as good, as selfless or as spiritual as they may think we are. The fear drives us to pretend, to fix together religious fig leaves and to hide such nakedness. “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” Genesis 3:21. Once we confess and renounce hidden sin, once we accept God’s full forgiveness, shame and guilt are replaced by peace and joy. When God looks at us, He will see Christ’s sacrifice. When others look at us, they will see

what Christ is still doing. Feeling fully accepted by the Lord, our urge to hide and pretend is gone. We stand free before God and man.

2. Missing Opportunities

After instituting the Lord's Supper in that upper room, Jesus and His disciples walked to a garden. It was here that Judas kissed the Lord and betrayed him. At this point Mark, not one of the Twelve, adds two odd verses: "A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked leaving his garment behind" Mark 14:51-52. Who was this young man? What was he doing walking at night in a sheet? Why are these two verses in Scripture? Commentators suggest that Mark may be referring to himself. It was his way of painting his initials on the picture, his way of saying "I was there too". Mark could have been the son of the owner of the large house where the Lord's Supper took place (Mark 14:14; Acts 12:12). He woke up on hearing strange noises in Gethsemane garden, grabbed what was close at hand, a sheet, and dashed out of his house to see the action. Whoever he was, he was curious, ill-prepared and left the scene running naked!

Could new opportunities to witness or to serve find us asleep and unprepared? Peter encouraged the saints to "always be **prepared** to give an answer..." 1 Peter 3:15. Religious traditions may be followed and defended mindlessly. But Biblical convictions are only acquired at a price. Communion with Christ must be cultivated. Those who join seeking personal religious adventures soon depart. Are we prepared to stand for Jesus when others threaten, laugh or run? Furthermore, the Lord sets good works before us (Ephesians 2:10). Are we preparing ourselves to engage in them? Are we developing our gifts? Are we growing? Paul encouraged Timothy to be "useful to the Master and **prepared** to do **any** good work" and to "be **prepared** in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 2:21; 4:2). If we wait until we think we are "professional" before we attempt to serve the Lord, we shall probably start late and limit the Lord through our self-sufficiency. On the other hand, it would be a great pity to run away naked simply because we were not prepared.

3. Facing the Demonic

"Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed... Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding" Acts 19:13-16. Do demons still exist? Can they still torment humans today?

The demonic is receiving much attention in Western Christian circles, especially in the last 20 or 30 years. It probably reflects a growing trend in ungodliness and occult practices in the West. Some Christians respond with over-enthusiasm that tends towards the theatrical. Some end up explaining everything in terms of demons. But there are also those Christians that hold to an academic theology which tells the hurting that they are not hurting. Such saints do not lack love. Their way of organizing Scriptures forces them to deny the oppressive action of demons today. Perhaps

more commonly, saints believe in the existence of angels close at home and demons far away – usually in some distant mission field.

As Christians we all know that Christ is the only answer. We are convinced that there is power in the name of Jesus, but... how can we help those oppressed, tormented and captive to reach freedom? You may be inclined to think in terms of dispensations or perhaps covenants. These frameworks highlight how God changes his dealings with man over time. Neither rules out the possibility of demons being active today. Scriptures speak naturally of the existence of evil spirits. They are part of God's creation, the same as stones, trees, animals and angels. You may be charismatic or strongly anti-charismatic. I would suggest that helping to free those tormented by demons is not part of the charismatic debate, it is not classed as a "spiritual gift".

It is evident that the topic generates some controversy. It always has. On clear evidence that Jesus expelled a demon, some Pharisees concluded that Jesus made use of Satan's power (Matthew 9:32-34). Some Jews thought that Jesus himself was demon-possessed (John 10:19, 20). As we seek to help people, especially those with difficult backgrounds, we are likely to encounter evidence of demonic activity. What should we do? Deny the evidence before us? Run away? Suggest they go elsewhere? – Surely the Lord can guide us to a genuine solution! Should we then copy what others do? The 7 sons of Sceva were Jews, not Christians, and had a degree of success in expelling demons. Some who did not follow Jesus also expelled demons (Mark 9:38). A clear warning that not everything that "works" should be imitated, is found in Matthew 7:22-23: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, '**I never knew you.** Away from me, you evildoers!'" This suggests that demons may sometimes leave when non-Christians use the name of Jesus. Not everything that "looks successful" should be imitated. That said, those with pastoral hearts, like Jesus, will be more concerned about helping people live free in Christ than to avoid possible controversy. Unless we find an effective and a Biblical solution, we shall leave the hurting hurting, or shall find ourselves running away naked from the next difficult situation.

4. Temporal Clothes

The practical apostle James highlights the Christian duty towards a brother or a sister who "is naked and lacks daily food" James 2:15 NRSV. We should ensure that he does not remain naked and hungry. In fact, the Lord himself identifies with the saint who lives the pain of need, to such an extent that He said "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" Matthew 25:35-40 NRSV. If these words of our Lord Jesus do not move us to care, to get involved and to be generous, we are probably dead inside!

King Solomon concluded: "Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labour that he can carry in his hand" Ecclesiastes 5:15. A few weeks ago, my father-in-law passed away. As a Christian he was an honest worker and lived well. Yet he took nothing material with him. You

and I shall soon follow. How do we view the material things that we have? We are only temporal administrators.

5. Collective Delusion

Perhaps you've heard the story of "The Emperor's New Suit" by Danish author Andersen (1837). Two swindlers came to town, weaved some invisible cloth, and sold a nice set of invisible clothes to the emperor. Everyone knew that only the "stupid" could not see the invisible material. The emperor had his doubts, but, he was not going to let anyone know that he was stupid. The swindlers helped him put on the invisible clothes and he was then taken out before the people. All expressed their admiration at such fine colours and beautiful design. Nobody was stupid. Finally a child remarked: "But he has nothing on at all!" Most eyes were then opened! – This story brings to mind saints in congregations like that at Laodicea. It was not a child but Christ himself who called out "You are... naked!" (Revelation 3:14-18). The saints at Laodicea had convinced each other that they were OK.

At first we may think that a given practice or interpretation is "odd". Yet soon we find ourselves accepting, repeating and reinforcing it. We quote the same commentaries, we smile at each other at conferences, we nod, and keep on practicing or repeating it. Only the "stupid" and the "non-spiritual" do not see it. Like it or not, our thinking is influenced by these social forces. This sad distortion of reality, evident at Laodicea, is common in conservative and liberal congregations alike. May the Lord take away our fear and open our eyes to see and embrace reality as He sees it. Many may admire our Biblical arguments and teaching, many may clap at our busy or "effective" ministry, many may envy our growing local church, and yet, if the Lord says "you are naked", that is reality. There will be no improvement until we humbly agree with Him.

Conclusion

In the negative, we should study and work preparing to fulfil the ministry and do all the good works Lord may choose to send our way. We should make it our goal not to run away from these opportunities naked. In the positive, nakedness is a call to be genuine, to honestly seek truth and reality and embrace it, to acknowledge our desperate dependence on the Lord. "And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" Hebrews 4:13 NRSV.

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