

THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES US THE COURAGE TO SLOUGH OFF
WHAT'S UNNECESSARY TO CONFORM US INTO THE IMAGE OF
CHRIST.

Michaelangelo said, “The sculpture is already complete within the marble block. Before I start my work, it’s already there. I just have to chisel away the superfluous material.” Michaelangelo’s David is a sculpture in Florence, Italy, and Michaelangelo makes this stone seem as soft as flesh. It truly seems like the block simply had David sitting in there, and Michaelangelo only had to free him.

The untouched block from which Michaelangelo carved David is not an art piece, and tourists wouldn’t flock from around the world to use their imagination to see David still trapped in the marble. It was through Michaelangelo meticulously chiseling away marble, tossing out block after block before the masterpiece could be uncovered within. Having more marble on David would not be a feature, but a flaw.

Paul gives shows us his resumé in Philippians 3: **“circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”** Yet none of those things were features, rather flaws. They were the blocks of marble the Holy Spirit had to carve away to make Paul into the Paul we know and love of the New Testament.

But it was not without pain. Paul continues, **“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”** As Paul sat in prison, he had a lot of time to think, and he could show courage, grace under pressure, as he realized that those things that mattered so much to him in his previous life were worth no more than the marble dust a sculptor made in his studio.

It had to have been painful for Christ to have chiseled away at Paul’s friend network as he likely wasn’t having dinner parties at the Pharisees house anymore. It had to have been painful as Paul’s meticulous following of sabbath and dietary laws ultimately didn’t help him. When Greeks who couldn’t point to Jerusalem on a map were raised up to serve in positions equal to Paul in the church, it didn’t matter so much what tribe he was in.

But all this sculpting, chiseling, and sawing that Christ was doing to Paul was so that, **“that [he] may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,”** Literally, Paul needed to become the same form as Jesus. Instead of carving out a David statue, God was carving Paul into the image of Jesus! Yet this is one of death, as that

image is ultimately one of the cross. No wonder Paul would suffer the loss of all things.

Yet Paul took it in stride. **“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”** Because Paul is driven by the love of Jesus, because Paul knows how wonderful the promise of eternal life is, he does whatever it takes to receive that gift of the upward call in Christ Jesus. He forgets what lies behind and presses on to what’s ahead. If a sculptor is too worried about wasting marble, he’ll never make the next Michelangelo’s David. Some marble just needs to be swept away and tossed into the landfill. Paul sloughed off what was unnecessary to press onward to what really matters.

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I had a crisis of conscience in a conference room at the headquarters of Microsoft in Redmond, Washington. My freshman year of college I was an aspiring computer engineering major. I had worked hard in high school to secure my admission to the University of Wisconsin—Madison. I took A.P. classes. I did community service. I studied hard. I stayed out of trouble.

But in the winter of my freshman year, I was wrestling with this whole becoming a pastor thing. One foot in both worlds, I applied for a freshman level internship at Microsoft. I did well enough in the phone interviews to get flown out to Washington State. I knew I was out of my element when one of the other interviewees said she went to the U Dub and I said I did too, but then realized she meant the University of Washington.

In one of the rounds of the interview, I asked the lady what advice she would give me as a freshman applying for this interview. She said, “You can take this advice with a grain of salt because I’m a Christian, but don’t do this just as another step in climbing the career ladder. Do this because you really want to do this internship.”

That’s when the hammer hit the chisel and a big chunk of marble slid right off of me because that’s exactly what I was doing. I didn’t go to Washington State because I wanted to. I went to Washington State because I felt like I had to. It was the next thing. Do this internship to get the next internship to get the job to have the six-figure salary to get the house in suburbs with a white picket fence.

Dear Christian friend, there’s a lot of good things the Lord has prepared for you in this life. There are also a lot of hard things the Lord has prepared for you in this life that nonetheless are rewarding, but never forget to get your priorities straight. **“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”**

There are a lot of things that can grab our attention: the next midterm, the next boyfriend or girlfriend, the next party, or the next job, but don't forget the master who is chiseling away all the junk to remake you into Christ's image. Forget what lies behind and press onward to receive the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

I know you're busy, so am I. But are you keeping busy with the right things? What is the Lord asking you to slough off from your full schedule so you can more fully and wholly follow Him?

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The Lord had been good to Eunice. After burying her husband Arthur after a long battle with ALS, she knew her days were numbered. Psalm 90 was one of her favorites, "**So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.**" She chiseled away at all those things that she and Arthur had collected over the years. Cindy wanted many of the books from their library. Fred wanted Arthur's antique gun collection. Riley took the pottery equipment so he could teach his kids the craft. None of her kids wanted the stamp collection, so she sold it at auction and put the proceeds toward her grandkids' college funds. Other things went to Goodwill, but ultimately a lot of it went into the trash. What was she thinking saving those old rusty beer bottle caps thinking they'd be valuable one day?

Yeah, it was hard. It was hard to realize none of the kids actually wanted the VHS library that they loved so much growing up. The kids didn't want to keep their art projects from grade school. It was hard to choose which city to find a senior living apartment between Rochester, Bloomington, or Stevens Point where her three kids all settled. It was hard to downsize and to sell the house in which she and Art raised three wonderful children, but she knew another family would purchase it and make wonderful memories in it.

She worked hard with her lawyer to make the inheritance process as smooth as possible. It was sobering to meet with the funeral home and arrange her final wishes. She cried when she met with her daughter Cindy and her Pastor to choose Bible verses and hymns for her funeral.

Eunice wasn't depressed. She didn't have a death wish. Rather, she firmly believed that Jesus is real. She firmly believed that Jesus is her savior, and she was ready to meet Him. She looked forward to the resurrection of the dead and didn't want anything to get in the way of that.

When the day finally came that she was called home to be with Jesus, she was ready. Her affairs were in order. She had a plan. She even surprised her three children with handwritten love notes that she directed the lawyer to deliver at the

event of her death. Through her actions she was able to witness to her siblings, kids, and grandkids how much Christ meant to her and how so many things we worry about so much in this life really ultimately don't matter compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. Because she had a plan, her kids were simply able to mourn her passing and remember her with gratitude instead of spending days sifting through papers and finding a home for belongings.

Now, not everyone gets such an opportunity to age and plan for their passing in such a way as Eunice did, but whether you are young or old, the Lord is using suffering to chisel away those things that don't matter to conform you to the image of His Son.

You can do this because the Lord has already made you His own through Baptism. He has suffered for you and died for you. He has forgiven you of all your sins so you can let the past be in the past, forgetting what lies behind and pressing on to what is ahead. He rose again, and the life everlasting is that to which you are aimed and that for which you strive.

In the midst of suffering you are being made into a sculpture more beautiful than Michelangelo's David. **THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES US THE COURAGE TO SLOUGH OFF WHAT'S UNNECESSARY TO CONFORM US INTO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST.**

In the midst of trials and tribulations, you too can show grace under pressure. You can show courage in the face of loss because you know that all the things in this world pale in comparison to the surpassing worth of being found in Christ Jesus and gaining eternal life.