

THE STRUGGLE OF FACING CHANGE PART 2

Reprinted from *Nightlight*, A Newsletter of McLean Ministries, Volume 86, July 2000

Held in The Flames

A very dear friend of mine was facing one of the most painful changes any person could ever face. He said to me, "How I wish I could just walk out into the hills. . . just walk and walk, and keep on walking. I keep wondering why I don't just do that. . . walk away from this terrible battle and escape it." These were not the words of an immature person. This man walks with God. But the limitations of being a frail human constrained him like chains to the pyre. The flames consuming his earthly life were fueled by the forces of change. In this crucible of unavoidable loss, my friend was in the closest fellowship with His Lord's suffering. For in His own way, our Lord Jesus expressed similar emotions when He cried "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. . ." "Let me just walk out into the hills . . . away from this terrible battle.

It is within the crucible of a world of changes that we are changed. If we have yielded our lives to the Hand of the Potter then we can rest in the assurance that every change is ultimately for our good (Romans 8:26-28). If we resist Him, we may find some temporary reprieve from His hand. We may even build a hideaway of false security where we seek to hide from Providential Wisdom and Grace. We can if we choose, exert our human energies against His interference. But if we build such a tomb for ourselves, we will end up like Moab.

Moab Refused to Change

The Moabites were the descendants of Lot. Though they were hostile to Israel, God withheld judgement upon them. They rejoiced over the rises and falls of the people around them, while for the most part, they remained the same. They did not know that by God's grace they had been excused from judgement, in hopes that goodness would draw them to repentance. It never occurred to them to go beyond their safety zone to seek Reality. They just liked the status quo. When God spoke, they thought it thundered.

The prophet Jeremiah finally speaks the closing judgement upon Moab: All his life long Moab has lain undisturbed, like wine settled on its lees, not emptied from vessel to vessel; he has never gone into exile. Therefore, the taste of him is unaltered, and the flavor stays unchanged. (Jeremiah 48:11 NEB)

What does this mean? Edward Miller explains that "the expression, 'emptied from vessel to vessel', is taken from the old custom of making a pure juice from the crushed grapes. After the grapes were crushed and everything was strained through a sieve, what was left was poured into a large jar and allowed to sit. After a time, lees (sediment) would settle to the bottom of the vessel and the juice would be slowly and carefully poured off into another vessel. This process would be repeated over and over, from jar to jar, until all that remained was the pure juice of the grape. As a nation, Moab had not been poured from vessel to vessel. All things were the same; there were no changes. Moab had settled like sediment, and retained his own rancid flavor from the layers of undisturbed dregs. This is a picture of all who are 'at ease from their youth.'"

Changed From Glory To Glory

I look back at my life and see the different vessels through which God has strained me; so many painful relationships, lost opportunities, and regretful behaviors. Though I also have many wonderful memories and many good and lasting friendships, still through all those changes, I have often feared the process and sought to avoid it. But now, I am learning to see the great necessity of being poured from vessel to vessel. I can honestly say that by God's grace I have not been "at ease since my youth." Though there are still depths in my soul which are obviously in need of much further and deeper work, I do not "smell and taste as I always have. . ." I do not draw my flavor from the rancid sediments of some unaltered past. I have changed.

The Unchanging Face That Changes Us

Kerry Livegrin wrote a lyric which has been like a sword and shield for me in moments of temptation. "Only Your Face can lead me to Reason" . . . The entire song is great, but those words especially have power for me. To look up into the face of the unchanging God and see His smile answers all other questions. It leads us to reason. Paul says that as we behold that face in faith, we will be changed from one level of glory to another. (II Corinthians 3:13-16) I am very thankful for that truth. But I have lived long enough with myself to know one thing for certain, I would have never sought that face had I not been drawn to look up due to painful forces of change that blew through my life.

There are several vital reasons we humans must be brought through these various passages of change in our lives: to make us grow, to teach us to forgive, to help us learn to love, to develop faith and trust in God's character. All of these are vital. We could spend profitable time studying each one. But ultimately, change must come to us in order to wean us - To take us through a cyclical process of letting go, which frees us eventually from the inordinate affections of this world, and sets our affections on things above.

Love Not The World

There is a sense of false comfort that comes to us from things that are not necessarily wrong in themselves. They are just impotent comforters. To seek comfort from them is futile. If we persist in seeking comfort from them after we learn better, then we move from ignorant futility to rebellious idolatry. This was God's sad lament against his people to Jeremiah when He said, My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters; and they have hued out cisterns, broken cisterns which can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:13)

When the apostle John warns us to "love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. For whoever loves this present world, the love of the Father is not in him," (1 John 2:15) he is not telling us to live in a cave and abhor anything that might be enjoyable. Jesus ate and drank with sinners so much that the religious leaders accused him of being a drunkard and a glutton (Matthew 11:19) No, John is warning us not to make the same terrible error of Jeremiah 2:13. It is subtle, but most of us have areas of our lives in which we draw false forms of comfort from things that cannot truly

comfort. God seeks to draw us away from them to Himself. Forced changes in our lives precipitate such deliverance from such false things. If we resist, we go from ignorance to rebellion.

Beware the Belly God

"Demus has forsaken me, having loved this present world. . ." (I Timothy 4:10) We are not the only generation which has heard the sirens song of this present age. Demus abandoned Paul evidently because some present earthly appetite took a stronger hold on him than he had on Reality. Paul warns those who are rich in this world to not be deceived by their transient state of affluence, but to "do good. . . laying up for yourselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold of eternal life (I Timothy 6:18-19) echoing the words of Psalm 90:12. "Teach us to number our days so that we may present to you a heart of wisdom."

There is no more precious scripture in all the Bible than the third chapter of Philippians. There Paul expresses the kind of heart we can expect to develop if we allow God to wean us from the things that are not of ultimate value. Paul was no superman. He loved, he hurt, he longed, he remembered. Yet he tells us that his vision of the Lord Jesus so surpassed anything of his previous experience that he could honestly say "What things were gain to me, those I count as loss for Christ. . . I count all things as nothing for the excellency of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them as dung, that I may win Christ." (Philippians 3:8-9)

Then he warns that there are some who claim to know Christ that are counterfeits. He tells his audience to follow in his footsteps, to copy his example, for "many walk, of whom I have warned you often, and tell you again weeping, who are enemies of the cross of Christ whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly (all the appetites unrestrained), they glory in their shame. [IE. Take pride in what they should be shamed of] WHO MIND EARTHLY THINGS. (Philippians 3:18-19)

But Our Citizenship Is Already In Heaven

Paul closes this warning by saying that our citizenship is already in Heaven (3:20). He repeats this exhortation in Colossians 3:1-5. "If you are risen with Christ, then seek those things which are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your affections [imagination, mind, heart,] on things above, not on things on the earth. For you are dead (to this world) and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who IS our life shall appear, then you shall appear with Him in glory. Therefore deprive of energy (mortify) your inordinate earthly appetites; fornication, uncleanness (of thought or speech), unholy affections, evil concupiscence (the attempt to manipulate to get that which is forbidden) and coveting, which is idol worship. . ."

William Barclay translates verse 2 like this: "Your constant concern must be with the heavenly realities, not with worldly trivialities."

But You Need To Be Realistic!!!

I have known many people over the years who sought to use spirituality as an excuse to escape the responsibilities of life, like paying bills and working. This is obviously not what these scriptures refer to since there are many admonishments to the contrary. (Ephesians 5:28, II Thess. 3:10-12) We usually say of these types that "they are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." That is not true. But this is not the usual problem we find in the majority of us. It is the very opposite. We are so earthly minded we are no heavenly good. The call of scripture is inescapable. If we belong to Jesus, He will be weaning us constantly from this life in preparation for the life to come, from this home, in preparation for the Home ahead. Are you letting the changes in your life wean you, or are you holding on tight? You might well ask, "How do I know what changes I am to yield to, and what changes I am to resist? Certainly not everything that happens is to passively accepted. That is fatalism, not Christianity." Yes, you are right. We are not to be passive fatalists.

No Formula But Faith

St. Francis' wise and beautiful prayer is the most appropriate response to that question. We are not fatalists. We are not worms. We have a God-given will and are expected to exercise it. We have a mind and are expected to use it. Some changes we are not to yield to. Some enemies must be fought. And the struggle to learn to discern when to fight and when to yield is the struggle of a true disciple who is always seeking to discern more clearly, by seeking the Face of God more earnestly. So we will find no neat formulas here. By now we should all abhor such formulas when they are offered. Instead we pray with St. Francis,

Lord grant me the serenity to
accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.
-St Francis of Assisi-

Swift to it's close ebbs
out life's little day
Earth's joys grow dim,
It's glories pass away
Change and decay in all around I see
O Thou who changest not
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