

THROWING IT AWAY

Life does not always get better. Not all of us “*Increase in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.*” (Luke 2:52) At least not all of us do that all of the time. We do not always move forward, becoming wiser and more effective in an unbroken line. Choices sometimes lead us into decay or disaster. The Roman Empire, like many empires before her, evolved into ever greater disunity, weakness, and decay, plunging the western world into darkness, or at least what we call “The Dark Ages.”

Such things are of little interest except to historians, and perhaps to a few others who are interested in what trends and processes may be going on in our own time. But as you all know, there are principles and patterns that go on at every level of life. *Individuals* can also grow strong and effective, and then move into periods of disintegration and decay. Some of us experience our own “Dark Ages.” And sometimes we move out of them into renewal and renaissance.

I am not referring to the natural process of aging or to disasters that sometimes destroy us from without. Such things also happen. This is a temporal world. We all know we are moving toward some earthly end. But for every person who is destroyed by earthquake, wind, fire, or flood, a thousand others move into deterioration or decay due to their own inner attitudes and choices. Sometimes individuals, churches, businesses, corporations, even nations perish through no fault of their own. But most of the time, in most instances, we are destroyed from within more than we are destroyed from without.

The divorce rate, we are told, is near fifty percent. This does not mean that half of all married people get divorced; if a quarter of them get divorced twice, we get the same statistic. In one of the best marriages I ever saw, both parties were on their fifth try. But it was about more than finding each other; they had both come out of their “Dark Ages” and were doing it differently. Nevertheless, when a marriage fails, is it because of external pressures and problems? Those certainly can be difficult. But external problems only enhance and magnify the internal problems, which in turn destroy the marriage bond. I think maybe one percent of marriages are destroyed from external circumstances only, because I have known so many couples who have survived nearly every known list of reasons for why a marriage couldn’t work. And they

didn't merely survive in some meaningless truce, but found a love-bond that revived into joy and gratitude greater than ever.

Most of the time, in most instances, we are destroyed from within far more than we are destroyed from without. This is very disconcerting, especially when we know that we live in a culture that spends the majority of its time and energy trying to fix external problems, and even trying to fix internal problems externally. Drug 'em up, or beat 'em up, or lock 'em up, or kill 'em. How brilliant. Aren't we glad we live in the enlightened twenty-first century?

One of the most fascinating aspects of human nature is that we can find something good, something wonderful, something we ourselves claim as a great boon and blessing – claim it, incorporate it into our lives, rejoice in its benefits – and then after a while, throw it away. Is there anyone here so incredibly stupid that, having once kicked a bad habit, they ended up returning to it? Is there anyone here so unbelievably ridiculous that, having once discovered a really helpful habit, they then neglected it and let it go? It's no wonder we have trouble believing God could love us.

Over and over, people have come out of prayer retreats and, after only a few days, are amazed at what the presence of God is accomplishing in their lives. Problems and concerns that had baffled them for years begin to melt away. Life takes on a new brightness, clarity, purpose. But four or five months later I ask how it's going, and they confess that they have grown too busy or distracted. The light has faded, and they tell me that they are back to truly praying maybe once or twice a month. And they also tell me that life is not as bright and good as it was when they were praying daily. "You stupid Galatians!" comes to mind. Only, then we have to try to make it through the guilt trap. Whipping yourself is not a good substitute for prayer. Just get back to it. God has no need to punish us further; we have already taken care of that. He just wants us back. (Happily, every time some "stupid Galatian" leaves my office, I say "sorry, Lord" and get back to my own prayers. If there weren't so many of you reminding me, I fear I would do worse than any of you.)

In any case, it is not just learning; it is learning over and over again. It is not just waking up; it is waking up over and over again. It is not just getting converted; it is the constant need for renewal – for re-conversion. "Two steps forward, one step back," we sometimes say. And that's on a good day. "I don't need to rewrite a Covenant every year. Joined the

church twenty-five years ago, and that should be enough. Half-lied about it then, and haven't taken very much of it seriously since."

Well, that is not what we really want to be like. Life keeps confronting us with choices and options, so we continually have the chance to wake up to our real intentions, and to the choices we are making that confirm or deny them.

So Paul is not being weird here in the Galatians letter. His friends were going back to their old familiar ways of thinking and doing. And if they didn't realize it – if they didn't wake up to their backsliding (an interesting old image; do you remember it?) – they would lose everything they had found.

Of course, they were under duress. That is, people with authority – people in positions of respect and prominence in their old familiar life – were telling them that they were wrong; that Jesus could not bring them any such newness of life; that their well-being both in the present and in the future depended upon their adhering to the familiar ways they had been taught since childhood. Torah (the laws of Moses) was God's will, and no other way of life could ever work or please God.

For a little while they had been deluded. For a little while they had listened to Paul tell about a crucified and Risen Lord: a man sent by God, with credentials from God beyond anything the world had imagined before; a man with the power to teach and heal and move and change people beyond belief. And He came insisting that God cared about each of us; that God knew us each personally and had destiny and plans for us stretching from the present moment into eternity; that in fact God loved us – loved us more, far more, than anyone had ever imagined before, or ever dared even to contemplate. And that this love was there even if we made mistakes, got lost, or hurt ourselves or each other. And that if we would respond to it, God could turn our lives around and set them on a better Path than we had ever known before, even if things were going terribly wrong all around us.

Then the hard part and the best part came almost together. This Messenger from God was killed because His Message was too new and too threatening to be endured by earthly authorities. And He would do nothing to prevent them from displaying their hatred and fear of Him. It was necessary, He said, for the world to show its true colors, or no one would ever truly repent and turn to be saved.

But then the best part closely followed. Death could not hold Him! The power of God was revealed in His Resurrection from the dead. He began to reveal Himself alive to those who had walked with Him, and then to those who were close to those who had walked with Him. And Paul, we know, would add his own story: that sometimes He even revealed Himself to those who had been His worst enemies, if their hearts were willing.

Only, here it is important to notice a crucial reversal. Historically speaking, the Cross comes first, and then the Resurrection. Spiritually speaking, the Resurrection comes first, and then the Cross. It has always been so. Even for the first followers, the Cross was only heartbreak and sadness – until after the Resurrection. It was only after the Resurrection that people saw the Cross in its true light. After the Resurrection, people realized Jesus' true power and identity. Therefore it was *after* the Resurrection that they realized the true magnitude of the Cross – both in Jesus' willingness to go there *and* in His refusal to coerce or destroy those who sent Him there or punish those who betrayed or deserted Him along the way. It is the Resurrection that reveals the Cross, not the other way around. The disciples looked back after the Resurrection and saw the Cross in new light. They saw all they had and had not done to help Jesus – saw all their love, and also all their perfidy, in a light too clear for words. And it was in that “after the Resurrection” remorse and repentance that they found a far deeper forgiveness and a greater New Life.

Remember the Last Breakfast? The disciples had to be reinstated and recommissioned before they could realize that after having blown it so badly, they were still invited to be followers and apostles. And it is after the Resurrection that *we* go to the Cross and find our own sin revealed (our own alienation and rebellion from God). We also look at the Cross – knowing Jesus' true identity because of the Resurrection – and then we also see in clear light all the ways we have not lived for God or been true and loyal followers of the Christ. Then our pretense is dashed. Our hopes of being good or virtuous or acceptable apart from Him are utterly destroyed. It is after the Resurrection – seeing Him for who He really is – that we look back at the Cross and find true repentance: our hearts broken, and therefore finally open.

And so this Message had been carried to the Galatians. “But you don't have to take my word for it,” Paul would add. You can discover it for yourselves. Open the gate of your own heart and soul – take down

the shields of fear and dread and anger toward God. He is waiting for you even now. Open your heart to him and you will receive the Holy Spirit of this Resurrected Christ, even here and now. And you will experience for yourselves what it is like to live life with His presence beside you, within you, all day, every day. If you want, you too can receive the Holy Spirit. Of course, you also must repent – you must want this New Life more than anything else in this world. It never comes separate from the Resurrection – and the Cross it reveals.

It is unlikely that Paul was able to reveal very much of this to the Galatian communities in ten or twenty minutes. We think the letter to the Galatians was written for young Christians in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe. How many weeks or months Paul spent on his first visit to this area we cannot tell. But soon enough, people were responding enough to get him beaten, thrown out of town, stoned, and left for dead in Lystra. The love of God is a hard Message to carry. A love that changes your life inside and out is always a threat to whatever life you have been living so far. (Remember, this is not “love” by our typical definitions.) Even more so if that life has gone under the flag of already being responsible and moral, reflecting good citizenship, and doing things pretty much as good as could be expected, and better than most. So Paul was treated much the same way Jesus had been, as he carried the same Message more and more.

In any case, a growing number of people were listening to Paul. Inevitably some of them got too close to the wire and found themselves wondering if his Message was true. And the Spirit, ever watchful, was eager to respond to any authentic invitation, however imperfect. So faith communities sprang up wherever the Message sank in.

But as we said, it is also possible to throw it away. Paul had moved on from the area – first to heal from the stoning, then to get on with other tasks to which the Spirit was calling him. And so the Galatian Christians now needed to maintain their new relationship with the Holy Spirit even though Paul was gone. Paul had not been the source, and he never claimed to be. They needed to be faithful themselves – with constant prayer, study, strengthening of each other, and of course obedience to the Spirit’s guidance – or it would all begin to fade. And on the outside, as always, people they once respected were telling them they were wrong – that they were offending God, were

endangering their children, were traitors to Judaism (or the American Way), and all the rest. Need I translate?

Well, we too have been given a New Life in Christ Jesus, have we not? Is it just words? Was it just something important to Paul and to Galatian villagers of long ago? Are we not also still coming out of “the world” as it operates around us, and moving into a very different plane of existence? Christ alive – and in contact with us! And can we still throw it away, even after all we have experienced of His grace and forgiveness and love?

“You stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” We are amused by this comment, in a way. Paul is so honest and straightforward. Yet he knew that the Galatians were throwing away the best thing that would ever happen to them. He is not being politically correct or using good psychology. But he is passionate, and underneath is a true caring that comes from the True Source. And so the Galatian Christians apparently did not take offense, but instead realized that Paul was telling them the truth. They were losing the best News and the best LIFE they had ever heard about. And they really had begun to experience it. What could they be thinking?! Why had they started to head back to the old ways? Was it merely because other humans were pressuring them?

So Paul rescued the churches with this letter. Can that letter still speak with clarity and power enough to keep us from abandoning our faith? Having tasted the mercies of Christ, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the love of God, are we willing to throw it away? Are we willing to:

- trade back the spiritual – for the material?
- trade back our baptism in the Holy Spirit – for the Virgin Birth?
- trade back LOVE – for good deeds (that is, the disciplines of Christian love for the appearance of a generic charity)?
- trade back our Resurrected Lord (a Spiritual Messiah) – for a Second Coming tyrant?
- trade back an authentic faith family (*ecclesia* – fellowship of pilgrims) – for institutional religion (religious hierarchies, creeds, denominational agencies and programs)? “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” (An old Quaker saying.)

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Do we know the difference yet between LIVING THE LIFE and doing churchy stuff – “playing church,” like when we were kids we used to “play house”? A living relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is in constant renewal and change and the excitement of personal application. If we still live by the Law, then what we *do* matters most. If we live by the Gospel, then what we *are* matters most. That is the terrifying thing about a relationship with God in Christ Jesus. What can you *do* for leverage to make yourself necessary, important, valuable? What are God’s needs, that we might fill them and become indispensable? How scary for children of earth to be confronted with *relationship*, where worth cannot be attached to behavior. Oh to be sure, behavior reflects what we truly care about. But in relationship, that comes after. It is aftermath and never the source. This haunts us, doesn’t it? *“God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8)

We have to come in out of the Law – and all other human demands and judgments about approval and performance and behavior – before, prior to, ahead of our ever being able to believe that we are being loved, accepted, blessed, or guided by God. The world has never believed it. The world does not believe it still. You have received it and experienced it. And you are supposed to take it to whomever you can find who is willing to receive it. Only, in the meantime, do not throw it away!