

T H E S U R P R I S E O F

Surrender

By Gordon Bals

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT LIVING THE Christian life often requires us to embrace the paradoxical nature of the Gospel? For Jesus to be faithful to his call or to "secure victory" meant He had to endure the "defeat" of the cross along with all the contempt and ridicule along the way. Like Jesus, we too must live with paradox: that in dying we live, in giving we receive, and in letting go of control we battle chaos.

On the front end, accepting paradox seems to make sense but in the moment of trial or testing it usually feels so scary that we run away from it like a child dashing from his play in the road to avoid an oncoming car. The problem with living with paradox is that we have to die, give or let go first. We are so afraid of the adversity that will naturally come our way as part of living in a fallen world that we have lost our capacity to adequately welcome the difficulty in living paradox. Clearly, the scriptures teach us to be grateful for difficulty because the Lord uses it to grow his character in our lives. Yet, growing the faith to welcome difficulty in our life not only helps us to grow Christ-like character it also liberates us to live life with abandon so when the Lord sends blessing our way we are free to enjoy it.

If we are going to accept the paradoxical nature of Gospel living we must relinquish control and develop a deeper faith. Faith is defined as "having assurance of what we hope for and evidence of what we cannot yet see" (Heb 11:1). The very nature of faith means we continually lean into the unknown with a confidence that runs deeper than what we see. Ecclesiastes is a book that deals frankly with the issue of faith and control. It starts (1:2) and ends (12:8) with the Hebrew word

Hebel (vanity or meaningless) and that word is dispersed throughout the book. In the context of Ecclesiastes it means it is useless (vain or meaningless) for us to try to grasp God's ways. We have no choice but to live in mystery. The author says it is futile to try to gain control through wealth, hard work, political power or the pursuit of pleasure. There is no certain way of ordering our life that can determine a pain free future. A verse that sums up the book well says this, "Dreaming all the time instead of working is foolishness. And there is ruin in a flood of empty words. Fear God instead," (5:7).

We deal with the unmanageability of life in two ways: active control (many words) or passive control (dreaming all the time). The dreamer says, "Life is too scary I will withdraw into a world of make believe where I will numb myself from the pain of disappointment or failure". This form of passive control we often call being "laid back". The other end of the spectrum is really no better. The active controller says, "This world is so scary and I am so alone I must work hard and stay busy to ensure my safety." We call this person "type A" or highly efficient. Sadly, neither the active controller nor the passive controller will ever know the deep comfort of a strong God.

The answer to the unmanageability of life is to live by faith. In this context, I would define faith as a "willingness to accept with openness whatever God allows to come our way whether that is suffering or ease". Ecclesiastes says it this way, "Enjoy prosperity while you can. But when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. That way you will realize that nothing is certain in this life. In this meaningless life, I have seen everything, including the fact that some good people die young and some wicked people live on and on. This reminded me that no one can discover everything God





has created in our world, no matter how hard they work at it. Not even the wisest people know everything, even if they say they do” (Ecclesiastes 7:14-15, 8:17; 9:1).

Living freely by faith is a central call of the Gospel. Paul said, “You have been called to live in freedom” (Gal 5:13) and again “we don’t have to act like fearful cowering slaves” (Rom 8:15). We can let go of our controlling grasp on life and grow a willingness to be surprised by the God who is in control. Faith is livingly freely in the care of a sovereign God. If something is good we can freely enjoy it; if sad we can sorrow over it; if funny we can laugh with abandon about it. Ecclesiastes says it this way, “There is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven. A time to kill and a time to heal. A time to tear down and a time to rebuild. A time to cry and a time to laugh. A time to grieve and a time to dance. A time to embrace and a time to turn away. A time to love and a time to hate” (3:1, 3-4). The author of Ecclesiastes is saying “Living with vulnerable dependence on God frees us to welcome any incident in life as a means for Him to further his life in our heart”. When we live in fear trying to avoid the difficulty that life inevitably brings we shut down our capacity to accept or enjoy whatever the Lord allows to come our way.

I have recently had the pleasure of working with a woman who endured the difficulty of watching and caring for her father who had a terminal illness from the time she was 13 until he died when she was 27. As part of our work together I suggested she read a wonderful book by Gerald Sittser called, [A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss](#). In that book Sittser tells the story of his loss (his mother, wife and daughter all were killed in a car accident). In one part he describes how a stump became a metaphor for the sadness he still felt because it was all that was left of a beautiful tree that was once a pleasant part of his backyard. Eventually, he landscaped around the stump which enhanced his sense of how it mirrored what was taking place in his life. Beauty was growing around and through loss. He says, “Now three years later, the stump remains, still reminding me of the beloved tree I lost. But, the stump is surrounded by a beautiful garden of blooming flowers and growing trees and lush grass. Likewise, the sorrow I feel remains, but I have tried to create a landscape around the loss so that what was once ugly is now an integral part of a larger, lovely whole.” The vignette about the stump and the truth Sittser was teaching powerfully impacted the woman I was counseling.

She says, “I had read this and understood, particu-

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larly the opening lines. I had experienced loss that had pierced through the core of my being and left me with what was once a void, but now an abyss. Loss that defined me, transformed me, and forbade me from trusting or dreaming. This loss had not found its place in a ‘larger, lovely whole’. It was just ugly. It was an element of my past, present, and future with which to be reckoned. Because it was so big and precious, if framed a context through which the rest of my life was viewed. I wanted to believe that there was truly a way to landscape the remainder of my life in such a way as to reflect such an integral piece while somehow simultaneously celebrating the life that was beyond it. I simply couldn’t envision it. It seemed too difficult for the two to coexist.

While still pondering these things, I found myself vacationing in Sequoia National Forest. I marveled at the splendor and magnificence of the largest living organisms on earth. The sheer height and volume of these trees was staggering. During the course of some 2,000-3,000 years they had grown to a diameter of 40 feet at their base and towered 300 feet above the ground. To stand beside them created a dramatically humbling picture of creation. God’s fingerprint was clearly on them. Having surveyed the most impressive of trees, in stark contrast, we happened upon Stump Valley. The aftermath of logging crews from the 1800s was devastating. Fields that once, undoubtedly, were breathtaking now resembled a graveyard of sorts. Enormous stumps and prostrate trunks now told a very different story. It was a very empty, hollow - almost sacred place. I had walked among them, cursed the loggers, and turned to walk away. It was at this moment, that what seemed like the very hand of God gently tapped me on the shoulder and moved me to return. I found myself once again noticing the contrast I had already photographed, unsure of why I felt compelled to stay. It then became very clear. I found myself staring at ‘a stump surrounded by a beautiful garden of blooming flowers and growing trees and lush grass’. Wildflowers everywhere - new life and growth all around the big, decaying trunk. Tears filled my eyes. My heart skipped wildly. It was as if God Himself had brought me to this very place to show me the picture of what he wanted to do in my own life. His promise displayed, in a scene arranged long ago, almost as if it were awaiting my arrival.

I found my heart full of so many emotions: Absolute wonder and amazement that the God of all creation could have orchestrated my steps in such a way to walk me towards this very place, and reach out to me as I began



to walk away unchanged, he loved me too much to allow that to happen. Sorrow and hope both fully displayed. As I mourned and rejoiced simultaneously, I found myself authentically embracing the experience. A sense of loss and gain both realized, as I acknowledged that my heart had been enlarged to new capacities to love and live, through the grace of seeing life around and beyond its losses. The freedom to dream - the wildflowers do continue to grow. I have seen them.”

The graceful words this woman uses to describe God’s surprise in her life are exactly what I wanted to communicate. She came for counseling in part because moving ahead in a dating relationship was arousing intense fear. Her past anguish associated with the loss of her dad caused fear as she thought about giving herself to a man. She could not imagine that embracing the paradox of the Gospel, that beauty grows in the midst of pain, could free her to move forward. As she opened her heart anew to God’s paradoxical ways, he surprised her. Relinquishing control helped her to hope in God’s ability to weave all of life into a “larger, lovely whole.” God’s surprise was not her only one on that trip. Two days later, her boyfriend who was accompanying her, proposed to her and she (in great faith) accepted. God loves to surprise us (in more ways than one) and growing the faith to live out paradox frees us to live life with abandon, faithfully following the path our Savior modeled so well.

what's
NEW?

Gordon’s transition to working with Daymark full-time is complete. He moved into his new office in the beginning of September and has enjoyed the rest that comes from having one job. In addition, secretarial support and a receptionist were included with the cost of rent which has lightened the load of administrative tasks. Julie is continuing to work part-time and has had a waiting list through the summer.

WE ASK YOU TO PLEASE **PRAY** FOR AND, WHEREVER POSSIBLE, HELP TO ADDRESS ANY OF THE FOLLOWING NEEDS:

- We are still short about \$1,500 a month of planned giving. To date, that deficit has been covered by one-time gifts but it is a month to month concern. Would you consider giving a regular financial gift (monthly or quarterly) or a one-time gift that will help us continue to meet our monthly budget?
- Several years ago a car was donated to Daymark that Gordon has been able to use. This has been an excellent way to supplement income without increasing salary. The useful life of that car is coming to an end. Perhaps, you may have a vehicle with several years of useful life left that you might consider donating to Daymark. Like any financial gift, donating a car would be tax-deductible.
- Through Daymark’s first five years we have regularly reproduced and given away teaching tapes from Gordon or Julie. Due to all the new costs it is harder to continue to do this. For those of you who have been blessed by the teaching tapes would you consider sending a small contribution (\$5-\$10) to help with making tapes in the future.
If so, please make a note in the lower left hand corner of your check that says ‘tapes’.

WE GENUINELY APPRECIATE YOUR PRAYERS AND SUPPORT. THANK YOU!

FEED BACK

MARRIAGE WORKSHOP AT RED MOUNTAIN CHURCH

I sat in the back of the room during our marriage seminar, and was profoundly grateful. We have hoped to create an atmosphere in our church where, because we believe the gospel is bigger than our sin, we could be free to put our struggles on the table. (We don't want married people to feel like they have to come across as Ken and Barbie to fit in the church). I was grateful that day because Gordon's insightful teaching helped open the door for honest wrestling with sin and unbelief in our marriages. I think the tears that were shed that day came mostly from a sense of relief in seeing that through Christ there really is hope for us! It was a beautiful day!

Steve Malone, Pastor
Red Mountain Church



I felt such relief in hearing that difficulty in marriage is not something to be avoided, ignored, covered, or managed. I think I would have thrown things at Steve and Gordon if they had given a **12 Step Plan for Avoiding Marital Difficulty**. Instead, I saw a glimpse of how God uses marriage to soften our hearts and draw us to himself. My feelings in and from the marriage seminar revolved around a couple of themes.

VALIDATION: *To hear godly men freely admit the difficulty my soul dreads, yet hopeful to hear avoiding difficulty is not the point. To be encouraged to give my heart to marriage fully and in that, trust fully that God will take the good and the bad and use it to drive my adulterous heart to the Gospel.*

CHALLENGE: *To relinquish control that my flesh desires and fear God instead. To open my heart and my eyes to see the impact of my flesh, my sin on my future spouse, our relationship and myself. Not to manage my flesh and keep it at bay, but to trust God to reveal my sinfulness, bring me to repentance and change my heart.*

CONFIRMATION: *That the deep yearning for intimacy in my heart is good. That the pain I feel in earthly relationships is not a sign of bad relationship, but of*

relationship this side of heaven.

REVELATION: *Of the lie that marriage to the "right" (by this I mean perfect person) will eliminate the loneliness. That even with open, honest communication, loneliness will remain (and that it's not a bad thing!)*

ENCOURAGEMENT: *To trust that in that loneliness I will find my God - rather my God will come to me. That he loves me too much to let me believe my heart*

is made merely for earthly intimacy, and he draws me to himself in that deep longing for intimacy. I felt overwhelmed with the thought that a good marriage is not something you "learn how to do".

Rather it seems to be much more accepting God's gift of redemption through the relationship.

How beautiful!

- a woman participant

Daymark Pastoral Counseling is a non-profit organization designed to make counseling and teaching resources accessible to individuals, couples, families, churches and para-church organizations.

We are devoted to helping others experience the redemptive power of the Gospel.

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