

Ball and Chain
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April 25, 2002
Thousand Oaks, CA

I recently experienced a great weariness, in which I became aware that I had been encumbered by what I can only describe as a heavy chain attached to me, demanding that I lift it and carry it in order to move about and that I was dragging its accompanying iron ball. I had come to realize that, in some substantial measure, I had been part of a religious chain gang. It was a good experience, for even as I became aware of the weight and encumbrance, that very awareness ushered me into the first phase of being unshackled.

Here I was, a preacher of grace, a recipient of the revelation of Jesus Christ, with a reputation as one who had received at least a little more than a status quo understanding of the eternal purpose of God, yet I was being confronted with something that I had taught about, preached about, and prophesied about without having sufficiently faced it at a deep, cellular level.

There was no sense of condemnation in the confrontation, but rather, I was enveloped by a sublime sobriety mixed with excitement as I intuitively understood that many things were coming to a head in my relationship with God. I struggled a bit to find words to describe to myself and others what the ball and chain was and here, I suppose, I'll be guilty of mixing my metaphors. What came to me was that I had been laboring spiritually to build something outside of myself, something that as the construction proceeded, it could increasingly give evidence of the reality of God's activity in my life.

This had been at a very unconscious level (well, to be honest, not completely) and I had been teaching and preaching about and against it for quite a long time, referring to false personas that we create, religious masks that project what we imagine to be true spirituality, hoping that others will be impressed and will give us precious affirmation that our lives have meaning. Preaching about it and against it affords us a hiding place for awhile until we must face up to it.

Do not misunderstand me, I am not confessing to a total life of hypocrisy. This had been an issue the Spirit had raised before and He had wrought some genuine changes in me, particularly in relationships with my wife, children, close friends and with those to whom I had ministered. But this time around it was, and still presently is, operative at a much deeper level and having about it a substantial note of finality.

I was; I am, definitely turning a corner and proceeding in a new direction where before I had peeked around that corner and meandered a ways down the block, maybe a little farther each time but always returning somewhat to the familiarity of my old neighborhood.

In a word, I had been avoiding the frightening conclusion that the Lord was really, REALLY to be found in my own humanity. My theology had always been very incarnational and I had challenged others with the fact that after we have studied the Bible thoroughly, prayed fervently, worshipped enthusiastically, read the biographies of the great saints, stayed in tune with what the Spirit has and is saying to the church, acknowledged our complete dependence on the Spirit of Truth, it turns out that where we find God is in our humanness.

Yes, indeed, in our humanness, the very humanness that the Word became. As helpful as they are; the Bible and hymns and good books, prayer and diligent study become eventually a quite handy distraction from that inevitable encounter with Christ in us. It is NOT Christ merely autonomously rattling around inside of us in some deep recess of our being, but Christ in everything that constitutes our humanness.

In many ways, I had a history of receiving revelation from the Spirit and often to a large degree, even while out of the loop in which others had seen the same things. I could honestly say that my understanding of the gospel did not come from men, yet I hasten to say that we all must confess to being influenced along the way by other dear brethren and being indebted to their instrumentality in our lives. In that regard, please note that while Paul could genuinely say that it was the Spirit that had granted him his understanding of the mystery hid from ages past, we can clearly see the seminal impact upon Paul of Stephen's apologetic before his martyrdom, especially in the seed-understanding of the church as the true temple of God. But I'm digressing. Back to the testimony at hand:

Suddenly, as I would give myself to reflection and meditation to more perfectly understand an aspect of the truth which is in Christ, I felt as if was mentally walking through knee-high mud in boots that were filled with water (mixing my metaphors again). I was getting no cooperation from the Holy Spirit. In fact, I was sensing a severe prohibition against anything that would smack of trying to figure God out and a pressure in my spirit to walk very softly and in fear of the Lord as to presuming to explain Him to others.

Over and over again, and I kept coming back to this realization, that God cannot be studied; He simply IS, and He is what He is IN ME! I could not be out of touch with myself and really know God. I could not build an edifice of understanding, and an identity out of that understanding with material from the outside of me. What also pushed me to this crisis-edge was an

increasing awareness that you can come to know a LITTLE of God's love through understanding, but you can have COMPLETE understanding when you know God's love.

When we look out from the eyes of love we see everything differently; we understand differently and completely. So here we find the point of tension in the crisis, at least that's where I found it. There comes a point where knowledge, even revelation-generated knowledge and the pursuit of it militates against "that which is perfect."

There is the tendency of knowledge to separate us. "I know something that you don't and you need to listen to me to get it right" sort of thing. In this knowledge-mode, I stand, in some sense, apart from you and above you, telling you what you need to know. Love isn't that way. Love has to do with the recognition of the "Godness" which is equally in our brother as in ourselves and "know(ing) as we are known." Love edifies, it builds up, it affirms, it supports, it dies for you. It says, "Yeah, I know about your warts. So what? underneath everything, you are constituted by God Himself. In fact, I don't even give true recognition to your warts for they are simply part of that which is 'but a vapor that appears for awhile and then vanishes away.'"

You might protest and say that you can seek knowledge and thereby increasingly come into love. I agree, but only up to a point, and then it won't work anymore, and at that point you will begin to acquire knowledge but it will only puff you up and be a source of division and not union. In times past, God winked at our ignorance (we called it knowledge) but now commands all men everywhere to repent, to have a change of mind.

Mere knowledge objectifies God. It makes of Him something, someone, among other things and among other ones. It keeps Him comfortably at arms length, to be examined, dissected and explained. What foolishness. He is not one among many. He is not even the greatest one among many. He is, as Paul Tillich said, the very Ground of Being. In Him we live and move and have our being. I must finally stop standing there as one separate little being looking at that other big being. I must come to know Him in my being, for as we have our being in Him, so also He is who He is and He is all that He is in all that makes us what we are: HUMAN!

What a passion for humanness God has. The whole administration of God has to do with Deity becoming humanity and becoming and being glorious in that humanity, because humanity sprang from what He is. Since "...man is the image and glory of God," that means that God took His glory and made it into man to give expression to Himself. Good God, folks, how can Bible study compare to having God reveal Himself to you as that which

constitutes you? You say, "my humanity is a mess and could never express the holiness and beauty of God." Nonsense.

I have one answer to that delusion, the blood of Christ. "Oh the blood of Jesus, Oh the blood of Jesus, Oh the blood of Jesus, it washes white as snow." End of discussion. The blood has been shed, now no more of this false humility. Let's get on with simply being the image and likeness of God. No, no, NO! Don't go study ABOUT it. Don't go pray ABOUT it. Don't plan a conference with it as the theme. Be God in skin!

Advance by retreating back from all your avant garde knowledge, and hide in His love until you reek of it, until its scent is on you. Then when people meet you, they will come to know what they need to know---that they are loved. "We know and have believed the love God has for us."

That's the gospel. The gospel is the good news that God has acted in love at great personal cost because He considered that we were worth it. You may have a different estimate of me and man in general. But you know where you can.....oops, a good preacher like me would never say that.

Stay tuned for serious, seminal, samplings.

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