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The Same Old Story

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How quickly the Galatians had lost sight of it! According to Paul, they had had a clear revelation of the crucified Christ and the glory it produced. They had experienced a work of the Spirit that had captured their heart and had swept them to the heights of what it meant to know Jesus.

But in less than a decade, they had traded the fresh wind of God's Spirit, for the predictable, but empty, patterns of trying to live in God's life by their own efforts.

In one of the first letters he wrote to any of the churches, Paul was beside himself. He was in obvious anguish when he wrote them, for he knew too well what had lured them earthward again--the need to boast in their own efforts rather than to trust God's ability to work in them. He knew how seductive it was for them to work hard for God and how exhilarating it would be for them to feel as if they had earned God's blessing by their diligence.

He had already been down that road, remember, and knew too well that it always produced the opposite of what it promised. Instead of drawing them closer to God, it only obscured their view of him and left them mired in a host of activities and routines that only offered a form of Godliness, but denied the real power of it.

How often that story has been repeated among God's people in the 2,000 years since. It's even been repeated in my own life numerous times. For the most part, I'm not even aware when I'm settling out of the winds aloft to tether my craft to my way to more earthly ways of doing things, because my desire to live in God hasn't changed. It's just that I opt for ways that look more predictable and more in my control. I seem to only notice after I'm good and stuck, longing for the freedom to soar with God that I have long since given up.

Regrettably the Galatians' story proved to be more parable in Christian history than anomaly. Like them, we often need to be encouraged regularly away from the apparent safety of the moorings of the rules and routines with which we become so familiar, so that we can be carried again wherever the winds of God's Spirit desires to take us.

Taking Flight

It has been five years now since Father delivered Sara and I from the role I thought I had to play in managing the spiritual life of a group of people. We began as a small group of people who just wanted to

learn how to love God together. As we incorporated more programs to meet the needs of a growing congregation, our attention to God's voice faded. We ended up with a large machine that required constant maintenance and where it became far easier to battle over competing agendas than to love each other from the heart.

In the separation we found more pain than we ever thought we could endure, but found more freedom than we ever knew we were allowed to embrace. It has been a wild ride since we cut the tethers that had held us down, and have come to discover that we are not alone. Over these five years we have met people from all over the world with similar journey and nearly identical hungers to know God in his life and fullness.

The conversations we've had have encouraged us and helped us see just what our Father is doing in these days. God is calling people away from the safety of those things they can control, to allow him to lead them to his fullness. But that process is never easy and in fact can be filled with great pain.

I wish there were a way to gather all of you next month for a week of being God's people together. I know how incredibly encouraged you would be to see what God is doing in people all over the world. Father is opening the eyes of many people to see the futility of trying to replicate his life by our own efforts. You would be so encouraged to hear other people tell your same story and know that God really is who he claims to be and that life as his people can be filled with joy instead of pain, freedom instead of conformity, and encouragement instead of confrontation.

It would be just a small taste of what I get to experience as God allows me to meet with pockets of people all over who are struggling with the emptiness of religion and the questions and accusations they get from others who don't understand their actions.

I hope we can put together some gatherings like that this year, but in the meantime I want to share with you the common threads in this age-old story, and some of the lessons others seem to be learning. I think you'll discover that your story may well be part of one far larger and far older than you may have known.

When Your Eyes Open?

It's not that we didn't try to find a way to make organized religion a tool for our passion to know God and help others know him. Many of us shared in leadership under one title or another, or at least gave countless hours and significant dollars trying to make the best of it. That was until we began to see some things we hadn't noticed before.

Here the details vary somewhat.

For some they discovered that their honest attempts to follow the voice of Jesus made the others around

them nervous or even hostile. What began as a joyful discovery of God's life together, quickly turned into a source of great pain as others rejected their insights or probing questions and sought to silence them or get them to leave.

For others, they found that the mere invitation to conform to the programs of religion couldn't heal their brokenness. When they cried out for help, people became uncomfortable with their pain and pushed them aside. Instead of comforting those in pain, they often accused them of not doing enough right or for not having enough faith.

Still others, in a growing revelation begin to recognize that all the activities and traditions are not helping them either to know God any more deeply, nor to see his presence transform the inner conflicts and temptations they faced.

In almost all these cases, the initial discovery came with great excitement. Certain others would be as excited as they were with God's working, they shared freely their hopes, suggestions for change, or even their disappointment and pain. It didn't take long to see that others didn't share their enthusiasm. Instead they found that their insights or struggles caused even close friends to question their passion for Jesus, their submittedness in the body of Christ or, in worst cases, even their sanity.

Cutting the Ropes

That which tethers us to our own human efforts are not easily cut. Few people I know ever intended to leave the system they were in, hoping rather to be a catalyst for change with in it. But when they met the powers of institutionalism which prefer procedure and rules over the breath of the Spirit they were shocked at how easily those who were formerly friends and colleagues would turn on them.

Here is a critical juncture. Will we risk our comfort to follow what we know in our hearts to be true? Many don't make it past this point, preferring to co-exist in silence rather than pursue their passion. I understand why people do that, but also know that he miss out on a journey whose joys far outweigh its risks and its cost.

Those who do go on, meet resistance on virtually every front. Accused of being independent, unsubmitted, or spiritually confused, they find their own self-doubts adding to the chorus. "What if I am nuts?" "Who am I to question what has been in existence for so long and seems to bless so many people?"

But Father's leading plays out in the deepest places of our hearts. Usually these people are not convinced they are right and that all others are wrong, but finally realize that they want only to follow God's leading as best they understand it. But pressing ahead isn't easy. As their eyes continue to open they see how the system is used to manipulate people and reward a select view. They see how people God cares for deeply are hurt, excluded or neglected. They see that those who have been lulled to complacency by tradition and

religious activities are missing out on the greatest joys of walking with the Living God. And for many they just can't keep quiet.

The Need to Convince

No doubt this is where the process gets most painful for everyone. Because the struggle to follow our conscience ensues without a lot of external affirmation, we find ourselves having to defend our actions. We hope others will still trust that we love God and will allow us the journey, but it is not so.

Nothing threatens systems of conformity more than those who begin to live in the freedom that Jesus purchased for us. Those who challenge the validity of the routines and traditions are often isolated and excluded. Mostly this is done through gossip by 'leaders' who think they protect God's work by discrediting other believers.

Regretfully some of us fall into the trap of bolstering our confidence by striking back. We too point out their faults, rail against the abuses and gossip about those who we find opposing us. That isn't always wrong. Jesus may want us to confront openly the failures of institutionalized Christianity, but we need to be sure.

More often, our reactions come from our insecurities and wanting to defend our reputations. We don't want people to misunderstand us nor distort the passions of our heart. We speak up hopeful that others will listen. They rarely do. We think they will be easily convinced if they just have the right information. But the sad fact is that many people find more comfort in staying tethered to someone's program rather than to soar on the heights of trusting God.

Though God may call us to speak up in truth, he never makes us responsible to convince others. I have long since realized that people won't see the fallacy and pain of institutionalized religion until God himself shows it to them. Sadly, that often only comes in moments of great pain where God allows the institution to fail us, so that we can see our trust has been vested in the wrong place.

We have to remember that those who don't see it yet, are not usually complicit in the destruction it causes. I'm convinced that the real danger of religion is that it takes our best motives for God's life and turns them against ourselves and others. All the proof I need is seeing how people caught up in religion can harshly treat others who disagree with them.

Where to From Here?

Many people I know are right here in the story. They have seen something they cannot deny and are willing to follow God's leading no matter what the cost. But how he seems to be leading them is very different.

Some stay right where they are, learning how to live in God's freedom even among those who are caught up in religion. They disregard the guilt-inducing sermons and glean what encourages their relationship to Jesus. Not wanting to waste time maintaining machinery, nor needing the notoriety of a title, they decline invitations to participate in leadership positions that are invariably offered. This will work as long as God calls them to it, but it is certainly not for everyone. They can find their motives questioned for not helping out or conforming enough, and few can resist for long the hypnotic complacency that religion tries to trade for our radical passion for Jesus.

Others find themselves out of the system entirely. Many are forced to leave by outright request or by never-ceasing gossip; others simply are unwilling to be a partner any longer in the damaging environment. This time can be incredibly painful and you'll find that people with whom you've had life-long friendships will no longer acknowledge you or seek out your company.

But what do we do for fellowship now? Some try other local congregations hoping to find one that is more focused on Jesus and less tainted by organized religion, but that doesn't work for many.

The temptation is to distance ourselves entirely from other believers and think we can make it on our own. While God may call us 'outside the camp' for a period of time to reorder his place in our lives and to reinstill a hunger to find genuine and healthy relationships to his people, his passion is to reconcile people together and place before his son a bride fit for him. That process may take longer than you want it to, just because you may not be able to find others who want to meet regularly to encourage each other in Christ. But let it have its end.

Freedom to Fly Higher

That needn't concern you unnecessarily. What is certain is that whatever ways we find to be the church with other believers, is initiated by Jesus himself, the head of the church. He knows how, when and where to connect you with other people. Some are finding each other through internet resources and are willing to travel periodically to find meaningful fellowship. Others find spontaneous encounters or simply fellowship with good friends to be a starting point. Where people are free to love Jesus passionately, the bride will emerge.

Personally, I'm thrilled to find believers who want to be God's church together. They want to learn how to listen to him together, to encourage one another on the journey and to care for each other through the twists and turns of life.

Without the trappings of religion, however, that takes a firm choice on our part and a willingness to invest time in other believers. I don't know how Jesus will produce that in you, but isn't it thrilling to see the number of people seeking out home-based church life? It's not easy and we may have to re-learn how we

think about God and his people, but the freedom it gives us to share life with each other relationally instead of organizationally is incredible.

The temptation all of us face, however, is to abuse this new-found freedom as an excuse for the flesh to reassert control of our lives. He sets us free from guilt and manipulation so that we can know him better, become more like him, and reflect his glory in the world--to believer and unbeliever alike. We can't make that happen by our own efforts; but we can choose to draw near to him daily, hear his passion for our lives, and follow him wherever he leads us.

Recently I heard someone in a clerical collar express his outrage on TV at those who question organized religion. "What would you prefer disorganized religion?"

It's a cute comment, but truly misses the point. The problem is not that our religion is organized, but that it is religion at all. Religion is managed spirituality--an attempt to make people feel better about themselves without helping them discover the reality of their own friendship with the Living God. It is man's attempt to do God's work.

It will forever keep you tethered to your own best efforts when Father wants you to ride freely on the wind of the Spirit.

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