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Thriving Outside the Box

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I have never been able to enjoy looking at a bird in a cage, even if it is a nice cage. While it may provide a safe haven and contain all the food and water she will ever need it also prevents her from doing the one thing God made her to do. A bird that cannot take wing and soar to the heights misses the best part of being a bird.

Over the last decade I've communicated with thousands of people whom God has awoken to the fact that they have grown up in religious cages that have stunted their growth and robbed them of God's life. Some were thrown out for questioning the sanctity of the cage, while others escaped when they noticed the door was not closed as tightly as they'd been led to believe.

But not all who find themselves outside the box thrive in their newfound freedom. Though many do, others find living outside disorienting and uncertain. While they know well the pain of the box they were in, they don't know how to thrive outside of it. Nothing works the way they are used to and if they don't learn to live differently their release will be their ruin. They will soon learn that freedom itself is not the goal. It is only an opportunity. If they don't use it to live more deeply in Jesus they will find themselves using it to stew in their anger at the cage that held them or to succumb to the ever-enticing flesh.

Boxed In

I know the analogy almost begs misunderstanding so let me be clear from the outset. If you're thinking the cage represents those who participate in a Sunday morning event in those buildings many mistakenly call 'churches,' you would be wrong. It is not as simple as that. The cage that imprisons God's people is not religious institutions per se, but the system of religious obligation that many of them (though not all) use to preserve the institution or to advance its program. Just because you meet in a home is no guarantee you've broken free of this system either. By moving it into a more intimate setting it only becomes more hurtful.

But no matter how we gather with believers, God wants all of us liberated from the cage of religious obligation. Because it is based on human effort for spiritual growth and community life, this cage is lined with guilt that you're never doing enough to earn God's favor and it is laced with the fear that your spiritual security lies in conforming to the doctrine and program of the group. It often focuses on an institutional program or someone's personal vision, rewarding those who conform while abusing those who do not.

Many of us who gave ourselves wholeheartedly to that system were shocked to find out that it could only deliver an illusion of God's life but never the reality. It exploited our most noble intentions and imprisoned us with our basest desires. It offered temporal security, spoon-fed nourishment and even some emotionally satisfying moments, but it could not let us soar to the heights. This system only wore us out with its programs, exhausting our efforts while bearing little fruit, and while it could conform our external behavior, it could not transform our inner thoughts and motives. So sin still undermined us, guilt consumed us and emptiness hounded us and we were only left with the inescapable conclusion that it wasn't working because we weren't trying hard enough.

Life Outside the Box

But every once in awhile God will allow his followers to see through the illusion of religious obligation and see what a failure it truly is. This usually comes with considerable pain - either exposure of our spiritual shallowness or of the exploitation or betrayal of someone we thought was a close friend.

-People react to those moments differently. Some take their liberty and go on in a relationship with God that becomes deeper and more powerful every day. Others may blame the symptom of the pain (an abusive leader or intransigent institution) and miss the larger reality of how the system itself destroys. They may move outside the box, but with considerable anger. Unresolved pain quickly devours their passion for Jesus and they find themselves emptier in freedom than they did in the cage.

Now what? Like the children of Israel who craved the comforts of Egypt some prefer to be secure slaves than free children. They seek out another cage or worse yet build one of their own mistakenly thinking that the problem was not with the cage, but with the people leaders in it. Others become so jaded they shun even genuine expressions of fellowship, fearful they will end up in another counterfeit. Neither the bondage of religion nor the complacency of freedom will lead people into Father's fullness.

If we don't find a greater freedom in Jesus outside the cage we will wither away. I know how disorienting it can be because nothing we learned in there works outside. To thrive in freedom we'll need to learn a new way of living. Here are some of those lessons I see God teaching people learning to live free:

1. Relax. This is God's Work

Religious obligation says that it is all up to you. If God isn't doing the things you want, you have to work harder, stand firmer and pray longer. The focus is on your performance, your obedience, your righteousness. Outside that cage you will quickly recognize that your best efforts will not accomplish God's work. This depends on him not you. Instead of trying to manipulate God he will teach you rest in his work through you. You will find yourself making better decisions when you trust his love for you than when you're anxiety-ridden about trying to earn it.

You will learn rely on him alone and recognize that any time you give up responsibility for your spiritual nourishment to another person - whether friend, pastor or author, you've already traded away a bit of your freedom for life in a cage. We can only experience the true wonder of body life when we are learning to depend on God together, not exploiting each other in an attempt to get from each other what we have not found in God.

2. Give Up Your Illusion of Control

Someone told me last week God was asking them to give up control over their lives. I told him I didn't quite think that was how God does it. You can only try to give up control if you're still under the illusion that you have it. I know our actions and decisions have profound consequences in our journey, but ultimately God is in control. Has any amount of scheming or manipulation ever truly produced the results you seek? When God shows you that you are not in control, then you will truly be free to live in his purposes instead of your own.

3. Live for His Approval

The reason religious systems work so successfully is their ability to exploit people's desire to be accepted. When we go along with the program we are rewarded with approval. When we do not, we are punished by being shunned, gossiped about or overlooked.

The craving for approval devours our spiritual passions by putting our focus on what people think of us rather than what God does. Paul clearly showed us that such thinking is at odds with spiritual growth: ?If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.? (Galatians 1:10) As you get free from the cage, expect others to play this approval card for all its worth. Even close friends will suddenly hold you at arm's length or say ugly things about you, all in the hope of drawing you back into the cage they think holds the keys to life. It does not.

4. Learn Grace in Opposition

Jesus warned us that if we follow him others will speak ill of you, make false accusations and even exclude you. Fortunately in this day and age, they can't stone you. But it is true that people in the cage regard those who are not as dangerous, deceived and rebellious.

It will hurt deeply, especially early in the process. But as you lean into him you will find his life in you becoming more real than the pain they can inflict. Knowing what God overlooks in you every day will make you more patient with others, even those who attack you. Your contempt for them will melt into compassion as you realize just how painful their bondage really is. Remember, as long as you are reacting to something, you are being controlled by it.

5. Let Guilt Die

You feel it when you turn down a request for help or sit out of a meeting you've attended most of your life - guilt. It is that deep, nagging drumbeat in your gut trying to convince you that you're a really bad person and God is upset with you. Even when you rationally know you made the right decision, guilt can be relentless. Many would rather give in to it than face it. They were trained that way. Guilt is the easiest way to motivate people who do not know who they are in Christ.

How do you deal with it? Let it die. Though you can't stop its drumbeat you can refuse to dance to it. In time it will fade away. You will also discover that those who help you most grow in God will never pile on the condemnation when you disappoint them, but they will always help peel it away. Like Jesus with the woman caught in adultery, they know that guilt rather than freeing people from sin only drives it into darker closets where it only becomes more destructive.

6. Savor the Story

In his amazing grace God gave us the story of how he made himself known to men and women just like us. He wanted us to know exactly what he is like and how he thinks so that we could know him as he is.

Evangelicalism may go down in history as the group that ardently defended the truth of Scripture while ignoring most of its content. The Bible is not an owner's manual with rules to be followed nor a file of proof texts to wage doctrinal wars. It is the story of God making his reality known in the brokenness of our world. It doesn't end with a book called Revelation, but with a person - Jesus himself! Scripture guides us to him so we can know him (John 5:40). If it doesn't do that it can itself be a hindrance.

If you're used to others spoon-feeding it to you, now is the time to take it on yourself. Start with the Gospels. Read them through three or four times to get to know the person of Jesus in his words and actions. Then read Acts and Paul's letters, understanding how he saw God work in people. As you get a handle on the New Testament, then go back to the Old and read it in light of the New. How did God's revelation get clearer? What has been his purpose through the ages and how does he think about things in our world? How does the Son sum it all up?

As you savor God's story, you will find yourself better able to see and appreciate how he continues to write that story into your own life. You will see Jesus more clearly and recognize his voice more simply.

7. Be Aggressive about Cultivating Relationships

You never know how God might use you to touch someone who works near you, lives near you or just passes by you during the day. You'll be surprised at the people he will put you in touch with and how his presence in you will be a blessing to them. (For more insight on this incredible process, consider taking a look at our new book *Authentic Relationships*.)

As you find yourself blessing others near you, you will also come across brothers and sisters who are on a similar journey. When you do, make the effort to get with them periodically for lunch or an evening together so the relationship can grow.

8. Live the Life, Don't Fill Up On Meetings

Don't rush so quickly to find body life that you try to rebuild it on your own needs! Real community is a gift God gives out of growing friendships, not what we produce by any methods or programs. Instead of creating it, we have only to recognize it as God builds it around us.

I know people misunderstand that and think I'm against meetings. Nothing could be further from the truth. I love gathering with the body in large and small groupings when Jesus is at the center of it. Unfortunately we hold way too many meetings because we don't know how to share God's life in the joy of ever-deepening relationships. That does not happen in meetings. The best gatherings of body life emerge out of relationships where people are learning to share the Jesus journey together.

If you know people who want to be intentional about sharing this kind of community, by all means join them. But if you don't, don't give into the lie that God has forgotten you. There are many ways God can relate you to people who are also living the journey, even if it is just a conversation here and there for a time. I suspect that when people have a hard time finding fellowship with others its because God wants to draw them closer to himself first.

9. Finally, Don't Despise the Struggle

I know it isn't easy learning to live outside the false security of religious obligation, but the freedom is so worth it. Scientists say if you help a butterfly escape its chrysalis, you actually kill it. God designed the process so that the struggle itself actually strengthens the butterfly so she will be able to fly away when she is finally free. Our struggles accomplish the same thing. They are part of what God uses to invite us deeper into him.

I know it can be scary when all the props that made you comfortable are no longer there. I know how easy it is to coast through life and miss out on the incredible friendship God wants with you. But don't you think it is time you found out just how awesome God wants to be in you?

It is one thing to walk away from that which is fruitless and hurtful and quite another to soar in the life of Jesus. Stop reacting to the failures of others. Stop hoping to find a system that will satisfy your insecurities. Stop waiting until you understand it all or find someone to do it for you.

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