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What About Him?

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"When you grow old... someone else will dress you and bring you where you do not wish to go."

The words Jesus used were precise and abundantly clear. No one standing in that huddled group on Galilee's shore that morning misunderstood what he had just told Peter. He would one day be executed for his friendship with Jesus.

The surprise breakfast on the beach with the resurrected Lord suddenly turned ominous. Peter must have just stared, his mouth agape with shock. The rest of the disciples must have glanced at each other with that "poor Peter" expression on their face, completely unaware that most of them would die in the same way.

Jesus knew he had just dropped a bombshell on them and certainly he knew the distress that would have been filling Peter's heart. He was not that many days away from his own anguish that had sent him to the Garden to pray on the eve of his crucifixion.

But Jesus hadn't spoken these words to scare Peter. So he perhaps reached to Peter, grasped his shoulder and pulled him under his arm. With a reassuring smile on his face he spoke the words he had said to Peter the first day they had met: "Follow me." It had been on the same lake some years ago and had changed everything about Peter's life. How much he had been through since then and how much he had learned!

Perhaps this was the best lesson yet. Jesus' invitation to him was still the same. He didn't have to be brave or strong or possess great ingenuity. He just need to follow to center his eyes on the one who loved him so much and stay close.

Nothing more simply expresses the essence of what it means to be a believer. We complicate it by getting our eyes on other things, but the secret to thriving through the ups and downs of life is to draw close to Jesus, doing whatever he does and going wherever he goes. In the last days before his Ascension, Jesus wanted Peter to know the same thing that had held him the last few years, could hold him the rest of his life. Jesus would still be with him and he would still be able to simply follow him.

But Peter's eyes were not yet where they needed to be, for they were yet consumed by his fears.

It's Not Fair!

When Peter finally regained enough composure to speak we see where his eyes were focused. "What about

him?" Peter said motioning to John standing a few feet away. The inference is clear. Is he going to die too? Do we all have the same road here?

I guess misery really does love company. I suspect Peter would have felt somewhat better about his future if he knew he hadn't been singled out for a worse lot than the others. His words do have a familiar ring to them, don't they? How often as children when we were asked to do something unpleasant, didn't we immediately want to know if our brother or sister would have to do it too. Even at work we want to see the joys and responsibilities evenly distributed or cries of "Unfair!" fill our lips.

Isn't it interesting that our idea of fairness always has to do with comparing ourselves to others? Every human relationship we've ever known has been steeped in competition. It seems our society can only measure worth, success even beauty in relative terms. How do you compare to others around you?

Sibling rivalry competes either for the affection of parents, or for their attention as we go out in the world and try to be successful. From the day you started school, you found yourself in competition with all the other students. The infamous bell curve bases education purely on competition. We don't have to know everything, just a little bit more than most of the others in the class.

In the work world, your application competes against everyone else looking for the same job. On the job your performance review is based on how you compare to others before you or those who have similar responsibilities in the company.

Even in church, competition continues. Minister's count heads as a measure of success. We compare our blessings with others (or our trials) fearful they say something about how well we are doing spiritually. We even use competition as one of the primary tools used to raise children to be good Christians. We put gold stars on attendance charts so kids who fill up their row can feel good about themselves, and those who don't might feel guilty enough to come more often.

To show you how poorly wired I was in this area, I remember a Scripture memory contest my church held when I was in elementary school. Whoever could memorize the most verses in one quarter would win a new Bible. I didn't even need the new Bible, I already had one. But I memorized 153 verses in 3 months. How good was that? Second place had done 37.

Obviously I won the contest, but looking back I think I lost something far more valuable the freedom not to measure my spiritual life against others. For most of my life since I have taken my spiritual temperature by comparing my life to others. As long as I studied more, prayed more, attended church more I could feel good about myself whether or not those things had actually led me to know Jesus better.

Am I saying competition is some great evil? Not in the world. Competition is one of the "elementary principles of this age," that Paul writes about in Colossians. Without it our world would collapse into

chaos, for it is one of the most powerful motivating forces for unredeemed humanity.

But in the kingdom? That's a different story. Any need for competition has been swallowed up by Jesus' death on the cross. He set us free from self-effort, so that we need only be motivated by his incredible love for us. Now we can just follow him, without any need to compare ourselves with any other person on the planet. In Christ we are free from the elementary principles of this age. We don't have to follow them, but we so often do.

Can You Imagine?

We see it in Peter as he turns to John, and that is the lesson Jesus wanted to teach them all that morning.

That's why he answered Peter's question the way he did. He didn't cave into Peter's comparison even though he could have. If tradition is accurate then John was executed by being boiled alive in a vat of oil some 20 or 30 years after Peter was crucified upside down on a cross. So Jesus could have met Peter's test of fairness. "Yeah! Him, too! And Philip and Matthew!" He could have worked his way around the circle, somehow proving God's fairness by the death of them all.

But he didn't. In fact, he took a surprising tack. He pointed to John. "Him? If I want him to remain again until I come, what is that to you? You follow me." Jesus expanded the problem to encompass Peter's worst fear. "What if he never dies, Peter. How does that affect you?"

And then he spoke those incredible words again, "Follow me." When Peter is looking for fairness in the lives of others around him, where are his eyes focused? On them and himself. That perspective will get you nowhere in this kingdom. That's why God has never answered my angriest accusations about his seeming unfairness. He does not want to encourage the very perspective that will keep my eyes focused in the wrong place.

We can only follow him if our eyes are on him. When we compare our lives to others our eyes are on ourselves and them. And that is as dangerous as trying to drive while gawking in the rear-view mirror at yourself and others in the back seat. That's the point Jesus wanted to make here. "Get your eyes off of John, Peter. There's no help there. Don't focus on the suffering ahead, just follow me."

How simple Jesus' invitation is. All we have to do is follow him. We don't have to understand the big picture and try to figure out what we are suppose to do. I suspect that's why Jesus didn't publish a discipleship manual with troubleshooting options for every difficulty or a list of frequently asked questions and their answers. He didn't want us pursuing a religion. He wanted to build a friendship with us that would allow him to be our personal friend in every circumstance.

How practical that can be! Every day I have more options before my life than I can possibly meet. Should

I teach at this church or go help that school district? Should I write that book, or meet with some broken people? Should I invest time today in Lifestream Ministries or Bridge-Builders? Should I only be focused on one of those? It can get overwhelming, until I realize that I don't have to understand the big picture. I only need to focus my eyes on Jesus, see what he seems to be up to today and follow him. I know it sounds crazy, but whenever I do that I seem to have great clarity about what today holds, and doing that the future takes care of itself.

Compare No More!

But I find it very difficult to do that as long as my focus is on myself and others. And it doesn't matter whether I'm battling an inferiority complex based on viewing my own failures and other people's strengths, or from the superiority complex of accentuating God's grace in my life and focusing on others' flesh. The fact that I'm even trying to find wisdom in comparison is the problem. My perception of what seems to be happening to me, and what seems to be happening to others will lead me to the conclusion that God is unfair and break the trust that I have in him and his incredible goodness.

Is it fair that the gifted young evangelist, Stephen, was stoned to death during one of his first sermons, and the young man, Saul, holding the coats of those tossing the stones went on to make Jesus known throughout the Mediterranean world? When you put it that wayE Exactly. That's how our limited human sight puts it, and by doing so we miss out on the marvelous purpose of God unfolding in our lives and people around us.

But, as this little encounter on the seashore attests, Jesus understands that. He watched his disciples compete over who would be first in the kingdom, who could be closest to him or who wouldn't have to wash the others' feet. He knows learning to follow him is the exact opposite of everything we have learned in this world. He knows our proclivity to compare and become confused. That's why it took something so marvelous as the cross to defeat any need for us to compete with others.

The cross was God's work for us when we were powerless to do anything for him. Nothing about us made us acceptable to him, except his awesome love for us. At the foot of the cross, we know that we cannot do anything to make God love us more nor less. Therefore any boasting we might portion out for ourselves is rendered ridiculous, as is any blame we render out to others.

At the cross battling over comparative significance is exposed as the farce it is. As much as the disciples seemed to squabble about that before the cross, they never did so after. The cross makes us all equal in the eyes of the Father. When you understand that you will never have a need to exalt yourself over others or tear them down focusing on their weaknesses.

At the cross Father's love was so completely demonstrated, that no tragedy in our lives can erase the

reality of his love for each one of us. Having loved us at the ultimate price, how absolutely silly it is for us to doubt that love just because things don't work out the way we preferred.

And at the cross all the righteousness of the law has been met in us, so that we no longer have to live by rules, guidelines, expectations even principles. We are now free to serve in the newness of the Spirit where the only rule is, "Follow me!" And the one saying it is the one who has loved us more than anyone else in all the world.

What God Values

What do relationships look like that are no longer steeped in competition? It's hard to imagine isn't it? So many of our relationships even with other believers have been tainted by it. But the Word paints an incredible picture of believers who love, share, support, serve, give; without a need to gossip, envy or complain about what God is doing in others.

Those kind of relationships begin only in Father's lap. I love how Paul expressed it: "For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth is joined." (Eph. 3:14-15) When we really understand Father's love, competition no longer has any power over us. We can finally value in each other, what God values in us.

Our world values people who conform, Father values people who are real. Sometimes we're so busy acting right, that God doesn't get to touch us where we really hurt. Jesus never chided anyone for being real. If we're angry at God, don't you think he'd rather have us be honest about it and work through it rather than hide behind meaningless words that do us no good? When we're not competing with each other anymore to see who looks most spiritual, we can extend that same openness to others, standing by them in their struggles to let Father reveal himself.

Our world values those who boast in their good fortune; Father values those who can be confessional with their own weaknesses and struggles. A believing community is a confessing community. People are not posturing to be better than others, but letting Father's glory shine through their brokenness and failures. When there is no competition there is no need to pretend that we are anything else than what we really are. In our conversations and our prayers we can freely look at our failures and mistakes, knowing that he is at work to change us.

Our world values tearing down others; Father values building others up. When I find people who exalt how right they are and gossip about others who disagree with them, I know they are still trapped in competition. The only way they can feel better about themselves is to point out the flesh in others. How tragic! They might be well served to revisit the cross and remember how none of us have earned anything by our acts of righteousness. When we understand that we can encourage others past the most painful

obstacles into the fullness of life in Jesus.

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