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YOU BELONG TO.....WHOM?

They were in a horrific storm. The seafaring men had never seen anything like it. A fierce wind and huge waves beat on the ship day after day. They were in total darkness. They stopped eating, stopped praying, and prepared to die.

A prisoner who was being transported to Rome stepped forward and encouraged the men to take heart. He said, *"There stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, "Don't be afraid, Paul; God has granted you all those who sail with you..." (Acts 27:23)* What an amazing statement! And it came about just as Paul had been told. Notice what Paul said: *The God **to whom I belong** and whom I serve.*

This poses a question for you and me. To whom do we belong? No doubt we believe in God and in Jesus Christ. But do we belong to Him?

The mother of a friend of mine used to live in Phoenix. She was a faithful member of a huge church. When she was eighty years old (over a decade ago) she belonged to a seniors group that had a retired pastor in his 70's who was the Seniors' Pastor. One day this pastor offered to take her home after an event at the church. They pulled up in her driveway and stopped, and the pastor turned and put his hand on her breast. She gasped, pushed his hand away, and looked at him in total shock. He was offended. With a look of anger, he shouted, "Well, I have a right to my sexuality!"

Whoa! That sounds familiar, doesn't it? "It's my body, and no one has the right to tell me not to have an abortion! Or to drink booze! Or to take drugs! Or to move in with my sweetheart!"

Does God really expect us to yield control to Him over everything? Isn't that kind of fanatical? The Bible states:

- "Don't you know that.....you are not your own. You were bought at a price, therefore glorify God in your body." (I Cor. 6:19)
- "Present your bodies a living sacrifice to God, which is your reasonable service." (Ro. 12:1)
- "Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (Gal. 5:24)
- "He who loves father or mother...or son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me." (Matthew 10:37)

Does it appear that Jesus is a cosmic joy-killer? The very opposite is true.

- The angel said to Mary and Joseph: "Don't be afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people." (Luke 2:10)
- "These things I have spoken to you that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:11)
- "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Ro. 14:17)
- "These things we write to you that your joy may be full." (I John 1:4)

And there are many other similar Scriptures. The reality is that those pleasures and attainments that the world and our common sense tell us will bring us joy: riches, fame, sensual gratification, etc, will inevitably leave us empty and alone. It is still true that "You can't take it with you." Or as the Bible says, "Naked you came into the world, and naked you will return." And even if our service to Christ results in suffering and martyrdom, as it did for our Lord, for all of His immediate followers, and for many thousands in our own day, we have His promise that our faithfulness to Him will lead Him to say to us: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master." Christ is not the joy-killer, He is the joy-giver. So if we are clinging to something in these stressful times, thinking that it will bring us joy, peace, and security, Jesus asks us to surrender it to Him that He might give us true peace, security, and joy.

A VISION FROM GOD?

As you get older sleep becomes a sometimes thing, or at least that is so for me. Some nights I only sleep an hour or two, although I admit that the following day I usually do some serious dozing whenever and wherever I sit down for a moment. But one night about two weeks ago was kind of ridiculous. I lay awake all night. At 3:00 AM I was as wide awake as a hoot owl when I had a vision. I saw a big, expensive church building, one of those A-frame type churches that a lot of Lutheran or Episcopal churches have, and the roof was on fire. It appeared that lightning had struck the roof near the ground, and the flames were moving up and spreading across the roof. That was it, that was all I saw.

Rather than make some assumptions as to what the vision meant, I spent the next two days praying and meditating about it. (Visions, dreams, and all sorts of words and impressions from God are of course highly subjective. While they cannot contradict any revelation in the Bible, it is nevertheless true that God can and does continue to speak words of prophecy, personal direction, and correction to His kids. Jesus said, "My sheep know My voice.: Prophecy and words of wisdom and knowledge are gifts of the Spirit for us now. And we are told again and again to "listen to Him" and to "hear His voice". Following is what I "heard" God say to me about this vision:

"In the days to come I am going to burn up all religious churches and denominations. I am also going to burn up religious individuals who appear to have My life, but they are pretenders." I asked God about another kind of fire, the fire of His Holy Spirit. I asked if His fire was going to fall on those churches and people who were following Him. I saw the word "IF" in big block letters, and 2 Chronicles 7:14 came to mind. In that verse God makes a marvelous promise to His people, but it has four conditions:

"If my people who are called by My name will:

- ***Humble themselves,***
- ***And pray,***
- ***And seek My face,***
- ***And turn from their wicked ways.***

then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Friends, we live in very serious times. It is obvious that God's judgment is falling in increasing measure on our world. The Bible says that God is a consuming fire. I believe that His fire is falling on the world and on His church. That which is not built on Christ the solid rock is going to be consumed. God wants to bless and heal His people, but it is not up to Him, it is up to us. We will determine what God will do by our response to His challenge in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

THE RAGAMUFFIN GOSPEL

A friend just gave me a copy of The Ragamuffin Gospel by Brennan Manning. What a blessing this book is! It helps us not to fall into two extremes: 1st - When we fail in our walk with Jesus, as we do in one way or another every day, it helps us not to fall into guilt and self-condemnation.

2nd - When we do something right in our walk with Jesus, as we probably also do every day, it helps us not to fall into pride and self-exaltation. Following are some quotes from Brennan:

"The Good News means we can stop lying to ourselves. His amazing grace keeps us from denying that though Christ was victorious, the battle with lust, greed, and pride still rages within us. As a sinner who has been redeemed, I can acknowledge that I am often unloving, irritable, angry, and resentful with those closest to me. When I go to church I can leave my white hat at home and admit I have failed. God not only loves me as I am, but also knows me as I am. As Thomas Merton put it, 'A saint is not someone who is good but who experiences the goodness of God.'

"The saved sinner is prostrate in adoration, lost in wonder and praise. He knows repentance is not what we do in order to earn forgiveness; it is what we do because we have been forgiven. It is an expression of gratitude rather than an effort to earn forgiveness. Thus the sequence of forgiveness and then repentance, rather than repentance and then forgiveness, is crucial for understanding the gospel of grace.

"The person who is poor in spirit realizes that he does not love God or others as much as his heart would wish. He has made peace with his flawed existence. He is aware that he doesn't have it all together. Our sincere desire counts far more than any specific success or failure. Then when we try to pray and cannot, or when we fail in a sincere attempt to be compassionate, the effort touches God's heart tenderly.

"I can be addicted to vodka or to being nice, to marijuana or being loved, to cocaine or being right, to gambling or relationships, to golf or gossiping. Perhaps my addiction is food, performance, money, popularity, power, revenge, reading, television, tobacco, or winning. When we give anything more priority than we give to God, we commit idolatry. Thus we all commit idolatry countless times every day.

"Regarding the story of the prodigal son: The father didn't cross-examine the boy, bully him, lecture him on ingratitude, or insist on any high motivation. The father was overjoyed at the sight of his son and ran to welcome him home. What a word of encouragement to us. We don't have to analyze our motivations before returning home. Abba just wants us to show up. We don't have to be shredded with sorrow. We don't have to be perfect or even very good before God will accept us. We don't have to wallow in guilt, shame, remorse, and self-condemnation. Even if we still nurse a secret nostalgia for the far country, Abba falls on our neck and kisses us!"

MINISTRY

Fred, Lynne, and I returned on September 20th from a two week trip to Minnesota. It was interesting and very different. It was my first trip to that area, and I learned that there are many trees, lakes, fish, deer, moose, bears, but not so many people. The roads seem to go on forever between fabulous forests, but they don't seem to lead anywhere. You can pass through a "town" without realizing it. We taught and ministered in house churches, at small meetings in churches, and even on an Indian reservation. The elderly Choctaw pastor of the church we visited was named Brown! (I don't know how that happened but suspect that his ancestors changed their name from "Those Who Climb Tall Trees So They Can See Into The Next Valley" to "Brown" to make their lives simpler for the Europeans.) The people were very friendly and gracious. I think it was the first time they ever saw any outsiders. (Just joking!) Actually, we met some of the most wonderful, saintly people - and also some folks who really needed our ministry. We saw several people wonderfully healed of physical and emotional sicknesses, which proves that God is also in Minnesota since none of us can heal anybody of anything. Right?

We prayed about this trip and felt God told us to go and that we would learn something about God's future plans for our ministry team. I came home rather confused because what we expected did not come to pass. (Have you ever been confused about God's guidance or lack of guidance for your life? It seems like I spend a lot of my time in that place.)

On my first Sunday back, Pastor Kirk gave an illustration during his sermon that helped me. He said that during Roman times the men who rowed the galleys (who were frequently slaves) were placed in the lowest place in the ship - you remember the movie, Ben Hur. They could not see outside, they could not see where they were going, all they could see was the Captain or the soldier beating out the time on a drum. That is an analogy of our service to the Lord. Most of the time we don't know what God has in mind in leading us in this direction or that. We usually don't see the fruit, the results, of our service. We simply serve Him in obedience and in faith. And then we leave the results up to Him. He will show us what He had in mind and what He accomplished through our rowing the boat in the life to come, but we probably won't see very much in this life. Amen?

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