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THE FIRST STEP?

In 1992, when I turned 65, Doris and I moved back to Grand Junction, Colorado, where I had been a Methodist pastor from 1965 to 1971. Grand Junction was centrally located to our children and grandchildren. A few months after moving here, I ran into an old friend who was also a former Methodist minister, and he told me about the Pentecostal church he was attending here in Grand Junction. The pastor was on fire for the Lord and a lot of young families were joining the church.

Time passed, and a couple of years later I ran into my friend again and asked him how that church was doing. He said that pastor had resigned and he (my friend) had moved to a different church. I asked him what happened, and this was the story he told me:

The pastor was a great preacher and pastor, and the church was growing, but this became a threat to the old-timers who had started that church. All the new young families had children, and the church services had become noisy....and the kids were messy so the facility wasn't clean and the worship services were not reverent like they had always been. And the pastor had introduced some new music which was just terrible. And the pastor wanted some of these new people to share leadership in the church, and that was the last straw. This was their church and this uppity pastor was trying to steal it from them.

So a quiet campaign had begun to get this troublesome pastor to move on. He didn't want to move on, he felt that God had great plans for this church. So the pastor started receiving anonymous letters that were critical and pointed. He didn't pay them any mind. So someone started throwing eggs and rotten vegetables and sacks of dog-poo on his porch and on the side of his house. He still didn't take the hint, so someone started calling him at all hours of the night, cursing him and even threatening him. That also didn't work, so one night a man called, with his voice disguised, and said, "We know where your little girl walks home from

school every day. If you don't get out of this town she is going to have a terrible accident with a hit-and-run driver!"

That did it. The pastor was not going to let something happen to his children. He resigned and moved away.

Do you see the correlation between what happened to that good pastor and what happened to all the Old Testament prophets? And what happened to Jesus?

Jesus didn't come to the Gentiles (the people who worshiped idols, people who had never heard of the Torah or the prophets). He came to the people of Israel who had the law of Moses, the Temple, the priesthood, the Scriptures, the revelation of God, and over a thousand years of tradition of serving the one true God. And how did those godly church people treat him? Worse than the church people treated that Pentecostal pastor here in Grand Junction. They criticized Jesus, rejected him, cursed him, beat him, and finally killed him. What in the world is going on?

As I thought about that Pentecostal pastor, an imaginary picture came to my mind. I saw that pastor standing and preaching the gospel with great power and passion. But as I looked out at his congregation, I saw that he was in a cemetery preaching to a multitude of headstones.

The leadership of that Pentecostal church were apparently not Christians, in fact they were dead spiritually. And the same is true of the church people that Jesus preached to. They weren't God's people, they belonged to the devil. That's what he told them in John, chapter 8. In another setting, he said that they were like whitewashed tombs, that on the outside they looked beautiful, but on the inside they were like a coffin full of dead men's bones. Read Matthew, chapter 23, where Jesus blistered the church people with scathing indictments, hoping to wake them up.

Jesus explained it to one of the Pharisees earlier, in John 3. Jesus told Nicodemus that his problem was critical, that he was a dead man spiritually, and the first thing that had to happen if he was to find eternal life was that he had to be "born from above" or "born again."

The problem with those religious Pharisees that rejected Jesus and ended up crucifying him; and the problem with those religious people in that Pentecostal church here in Grand Junction that ran their godly pastor out of town was the same. They were dead spiritually. Jesus was preaching to a cemetery as he said in Matthew 23.

Jesus did not come down from heaven in order to improve people's morals and make them better people. He came to a cemetery full of dead people with the gift of life! In John 11, Jesus went to the little town of Bethany and was told that his friend Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus had them roll away the stone from in front of the burial cave, and Jesus shouted, "LAZARUS, COME FORTH!" And out he came.

In 1957 there was another man who was dead to God, dead in his trespasses and sins, and on his way to hell. That man couldn't help himself any more than Lazarus could help himself. And Jesus stood before that pathetic man and called out, "GLENN, COME FORTH!" And out I came. I had been born from above. That wasn't the end of the story but the beginning, and it took years of painful work to get those filthy grave clothes off of me. That is a work that is still not finished. God has promised "To bring to completion the work that He has begun in us."

So this is my question to you: Have you been born again, born from above? Do you have a heart set on loving God, obeying Him, serving Him? Are you loving and serving your neighbors?

And how about your church? Is it truly a church of Christ, or is it a cemetery?

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THE PERSISTENT WIDOW

In one of Jesus' parables (Luke 18:1-8), he told about a widow who had been cheated by a certain man. This widow went to the judge in that town and presented the evidence to prove her case. But the judge was indifferent and lazy. He couldn't be bothered and told her to go away. But she wouldn't turn loose. She kept going back and going back and pestering the judge. Finally, he said, "Okay, already!" And he did what he should have done at first and the widow received justice.

Jesus' point was not that God is an unjust judge but that God appreciates and rewards persistence like the widow demonstrated.

I just read an example of this kind of persistence that amazed me. My son Chet loaned me a little

book by Brian Blount, who is the pastor of a Vineyard church in Oklahoma City. Brian is one of those people who is especially gifted by God with the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12, and following is one of his stories:

"On one of my trips, I was walking with a pastor friend outside some shops when I noticed a young man walking by with a limp. Suddenly, I felt faith rise up in my heart and knew God wanted to heal him. "Excuse me, sir," I said. "If you will let me pray for you, I believe Jesus will heal your leg." He was stunned. "Really? You think that?"

He told me about his injury and said he had been dealing with pain daily for years. He could not walk normally.

I prayed a short prayer of command: "I command all the pain to go now!" and had him move his leg to see what happened. No change at all. I prayed again, Still nothing. I prayed four more times but still nothing changed. By this time, the guy was looking at his watch. He said he had to go into the store but promised to come back in a few minutes.

I never expected to see him again, but I waited for him. About ten minutes later, he came back out with some of his friends. I didn't know what to expect. But he let me resume praying for him. So I prayed another short prayer of command (which is the way Jesus always prayed), but again nothing happened. So I kept praying and praying, and each time I would ask him to check his leg to see if there was any change (remember that Jesus told the man with the withered arm to "Stretch out your arm!" and as he did that he was healed).

My pastor friend was giving me the sideways "This isn't working so let's go" look, but I was not going to give up as long as the guy would stay with me.

On the 47th prayer (I was mentally keeping count), he was suddenly healed. All the pain vanished and he could put weight on his leg and walk straight. Everyone was shocked. All his friends started flipping out and started asking for prayer for all kinds of needs. By the end, all of them had given their lives to Jesus.

Until we risk being foolish in the eyes of others and show tenacity (like the widow seeking justice in Jesus' story), we don't know what God will do."

So have you given up on God in a certain situation in your life? Read Brian's story again and talk to God about your situation.

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LIVING BY FAITH

Everybody is living by faith; that is, by the things we believe. The question is, faith in what, and are the things we believe true? The things you claim to “know” that are obviously true and indisputable are not obvious to a lot of people and they will dispute every “fact” you marshal. For instance, the things you say about politics, or nature, or science, or the meaning of life, or God. Right?

So let me share a few things that we “believers;” i.e. Christians, believe presumably. Perhaps it would be safer to say that these are some things I believe presently....for I have noticed that there are some things I used to believe that have changed over the years. There are some things, of course, that should be unchangeable, and these were assembled by the church a long time ago in the form of statements of faith called the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.

The Apostles’ Creed starts, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth....” We Christians believe in the first sentence in the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” A lot of people don’t believe that at all. And even though you and I “know” that it’s true, we can’t prove it. Nor can they prove that the universe came into existence in some other fashion. It is an item of faith for us and for them.

We Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God. But what does that mean? There are literally dozens of beliefs that different churches have come up with to explain this. Does the bible contain the Word of God, or is it the very words of God? I have 8 or 10 different translations of the bible - - from the King James to the NAS, NIV, Passion, and Message. Which one of them is the right one? There have been wars fought (really) over that question. Actually, all of these translations are in agreement about the central Christian truths.

In John 14:6, Jesus said to the disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life....” What does that mean? Let me share what I believe (Note - believe) it means:

The early Christians were called followers of “The Way.” Which means that Jesus demonstrated and explained the way all of us are supposed to live. And how did Jesus live? You have to read his biography in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to get the full picture, but in brief we could say that he lived a life of faith and love and obedience to his

Heavenly Father to his last breath on the cross. That’s “The Way” he tells us to live.

What did he mean when he said, “I am the truth and the life?” Another word for truth is reality. Jesus defines by his words and by his life what is true about life, mankind, sin and salvation, good and evil, judgment, eternity, God.....and the list could go on and on. What questions do you have about life? Study the life of Jesus Christ, his teachings, his death and resurrection - - and you will find the answer. Any “truth” that people come up with that disagrees with Jesus’ life and teachings is a lie and leads to death.

All Christians believe in heaven (I think), but a lot of them don’t believe in hell, although the Bible is clear about it. In fact, Jesus taught more about hell than he did about heaven. Could Jesus have been mistaken about this? C. S. Lewis said he wished the subject of hell wasn’t in the Bible. Me too. But he went on to explain the necessity of hell. He explained that God created men and women with free will. And God sent prophets to proclaim God’s amazing love for people. And God sent his Son to demonstrate His amazing love for people. But the choice is up to us. Will we, will you and I believe in this amazing God and love Him back, surrender to Him, obey and serve Him? Or will we live in rebellion and defiance of God’s clear revelation? The great majority of people choose continued rebellion. Turn on the evening news and you will see what that looks like.

And what is God supposed to do at the final judgment with people who have been defiant, who have shaken their fists in His face all their lives? Jesus answered that very question in one of his parables, the Parable of the Tenants, Luke 20:9-19. Please take time to read this little parable.

Lee Strobel addresses this issue also in his book, “The Case for Christ.” In a chapter titled “The Disquieting Question of Hell” he says. “Hell is not a place where people are consigned although they were pretty good folks but just didn’t believe the right stuff. They are consigned there, first and foremost, because they defy their Maker and want to be at the center of the universe. Hell is not populated by people who are not quite good enough to pass God’s test, it’s filled with people who for all eternity persist in their God-defying rebellion.”

And another important point: “One of the things that the Bible does insist is that in the end not only will justice be done, but justice will be seen to be

done by every person who has ever lived, so that every mouth will be stopped.”

This reminded me of a personal testimony that I read several years ago. This is a scary story and you can receive it (believe it) or not, but it was certainly real to the man who experienced it. This man had been a high-school principal for much of his career. He thought highly of himself and never gave God or eternity more than a passing thought. But he had a severe heart attack and a death experience. He said this is what happened:

“My heart suddenly started burning terribly, and then I felt myself descending into a darkness that was palpable.. I fell onto a stone floor. Then I was surrounded by hideous creatures that started kicking me and slashing me with their claws. They said, ‘You belong to us now.’ I was filled with terror and despair, but never once did I ask what I was doing in that awful place. I knew why I was there.

“Memories started coming to my mind, secrets I had guarded all my life, things that would have ruined my reputation. I thought about my career as a teacher and a principal. There had been times when the City Council and the School Board had pressured the staff to follow a path that was not good for the students, their families, or the teachers; in fact, on a few occasions the decisions were stupid and destructive.. Everybody in the school system understood the issues, but no one had the courage to stand up and speak the truth. My decision had always been to keep my head down and not make waves. It was clear to me now that that was a cowardly decision.

“And I had so much pride - in my intelligence, my education, my success. I started remembering all the times that God had reached out to me during my life - through friends, through students, or through something I read or heard on television, or through sudden impressions that I would have of God speaking to me, or even through some dreams. Things like that happened to me periodically all during my life, and I knew God was calling me, but I said, ‘No! I will not change my life and start obeying you. I will not!’ I knew I deserved any judgment that God pronounced on me, and I was filled with dread and despair.

Then, he said, God spoke to him and said, “I will return you to earth for a time and give you one more chance.” He couldn’t comprehend the mercy that God was showing him. As soon as he recovered sufficiently from the heart attack, he ran to a friend who was a Christian, told him the story

and asked, “What am I supposed to do?” And he surrendered his life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you believe this story really happened, or was it all imaginary? The Bible says, “It is given unto man once to die and then the judgment.” Do you believe it?

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Teaching about hell has always been a downer for me. I don’t really like to do it. Then why do I do it? More importantly, why did Jesus do it? Because it is the truth, and people need to know.

What kind of God is there that He would create even the possibility of people spending forever in such a place?

He is the kind of God who would give His only Son to die on the cross in our place, so that we could avoid that terrible fate by believing and trusting in Him.

God is not a heartless monster. That is the kind of accusation that comes from the devil. Have you seen “The Chosen?” The Jesus presented there is a marvelous picture of God: kind, gentle, giving, sacrificial.

He created you to have a unique role in bringing his Kingdom to earth, and a forever role in the Kingdom to come. Choose to believe it. It is a matter of the will. Will you choose to believe? Will you humble yourself and surrender to Him?

A pastor I know said that when he came to the decisive moment he simply said, “Well, here I am, God.” You might try those words.

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