

“REFORMATION REQUIRED!”  
Psalm 90, I Thessalonians 2:1-8  
October 24 & 25, 2020 - Reformation Sunday

“Dr. Richard D’Ambrosio tells in his book, *No Language But A Cry*, about an experience early in his practice as a psychoanalyst. In response to a friend’s request he visited a dreary-looking institution for homeless girls. He tried to be realistic so he told himself: ‘I already have enough patients to take care of.’ But something caused him to read some of the case histories – a collection of human misery that some doctors might not encounter in a whole lifetime of practice. One case evoked his particular attention. It was the case of a girl he calls ‘Laura,’ the worst case of all.

“Laura was twelve-years-old. At the age of one she had been snatched from the stove where her drunken parents were literally trying to cook her. Since that day she had not been able to speak. In addition, her body was bent from a severe curvature of the spine; she had crossed eyes and burn scars on her face. Because of her lack of response to therapy, she was classified as a mental defective. ‘Too big a job,’ was the doctor’s first reaction. But, again, an inexplicable something caused him to become very unrealistic: he would try to help the child.

“The young doctor worked with the girl, week after week, in a small office he had set up in the institution, decorated with toys. He visited with her for hours on end. He talked with her. He took her for walks. He built a dollhouse for her and stocked it with a family of dolls and doll furniture. But she showed no signs of interest.

“As the years passed, he could count only little gains. Gradually, very gradually, her walk improved. One day as a group of roller-skaters careened toward her on the sidewalk, she grabbed the doctor and clung to him in fright.

“After three years, Doctor D’Ambrosio felt the time had come to give Laura a shock that might break through the protective shell she had built around herself after her terrifying babyhood experience. As Laura watched, the doctor played the role of a puppet master. He caused the mother doll and father doll to change from loving parents to angry ones. They began to yell at the crying infant dolls, and to

beat them. It was then that Laura's breakthrough came.

“She trembled and shook as the doll battle continued, and then the doctor heard a scream: ‘No! No! No!’ She had uttered the first words anyone had ever heard from her. She continued to scream as she hit the mother and father dolls and sent the dollhouse crashing to the floor.

“Thereafter Laura made a rapid entry into the real world. She began to talk. She studied. She grew. She underwent surgery to straighten her back and correct her eyes, and to remove the burn scars from her face. Ten years after Doctor D’Ambrosio began to work with her, Laura left the institution – trained as a teacher of other children who need special attention.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, I share this illustration with you today, not to scare you or to surprise you, but in order to encourage you. Our world today is as up-side-down as Laura's life was, and many of us are suffering the same kinds of conditions that she experienced. The world has thrown us one huge curveball and it's taken us off guard, and unsettled us to the point that our faith is paralyzed, our life has become mundane and meaningless, and our confidence is hopeless and without courage. The events of our life have sometimes even caused us to withdraw, to encase ourselves within a protective bubble, letting no one inside so that no more hurt or pain can come to us.

But the stuff of the world keeps coming at us, keeps causing hurt and pain which drives us in one of two directions: 1) to either continue to build up the walls of protection and isolation, or 2) to begin looking for an avenue to deal with the hardships we've encountered in life and begin to grow. On the one side, our life becomes all about us, frightened, hiding, withdrawn, protective, self-seeking. On the other side, opening up to receive help from the Lord in order to grow in our faith, despite the trials and struggles of life, in order to blossom and flourish as a child of God, willing to reach out to the aid of others who are hurting, so that they might find peace and happiness with the Lord, too.

You see, when the world turns against us, it is so easy for us to turn away from the things of God and follow our own wisdom and our own knowledge, just to protect ourselves with that protective

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<sup>1</sup> (James F. Colaianni, *Sunday Sermons Treasury of Illustrations*, [Pleasantville, N.J.: Voicings Publications, 1982] pg. 47-48)

bubble around us. But God desires that we recognize Him as *our home* (Psalm 91:1), that we turn to Him for His protection and guidance so we can face this world unafraid. God has been there even before the creation of the world, establishing all that we know for His glory and for our enjoyment (90:2). He has established His laws and His ways for us to live by so that no matter what comes our way, we do not need to try to escape the problems of life through isolation, but continue to boldly live in the world as His servants.

Yet, because of our sin, because of our rebellion against God's ways and God's commands, the psalmist says, "*You tell [us] to return to what [we were]; You change [us back to dust]*" (90:3) because of our rejection of all that is God. Because we forfeit God's goodness and blessings for the things of this world, we face all of the struggles and hardships that come from wanting only our own way, our own desires, our own business. So because we jettison God's will and God's ways from our lives, we are only left with trying to cope with the things of this world by withdrawing and hiding and becoming silent, for fear that if we speak out, even more danger and corruption will enter into our lives. So we become mentally and spiritually defective and find ourselves unable to enjoy the blessings all around us.

And when that happens, the psalmist tells us that we become "*like weeds that sprout in the morning, that grow and burst into bloom, then dry up and die in the evening. We are destroyed by [God's] anger; we are terrified by [His] fury. [He] places our sins before [Him], our secret sins where [He] can see them. [And] our life is cut short by [His] anger...*" (Psalm 90:6-8a).

So many people of the world today find themselves right here in this condition – hopeless, helpless, discouraged, afraid, oppressed by the world, beaten up by their society, cruelly harassed by leaders seeking only their own power and authority. So many people have already given up, like Laura, who are so despondent by their experience in the world that they no longer have any life in them. They are merely existing. There is no joy; there is no peace; there is no hope; there is no power to drive them on; there is no future for them because they just want to protect themselves from their past – they never want to look into the future at what is possible – they never want to go beyond what is right now. So

they cry out, *“How much longer will Your anger last? Have pity, O Lord, on your servants!”* (Psalm 90:11)

So what must be done to bring us out of our protective bubbles, our mental and spiritual defectiveness? How are we to find newness of life? How are we to find God’s *“constant love, so that we may sing and be glad all our life”* (90:14)? How do we find *“as much happiness as the sadness You gave us during all our years of misery”* (90:15)?

**Reformation of our lives** is required! **Transformation of our spirits** is necessary. That protective bubble has to be burst so that we no longer rely upon our own selves. But we need outside help, for we cannot do it by ourselves. We must seek beyond our protective bubbles, our own wisdom and our own ways, in order to acknowledge the wisdom and power and authority of God’s Will and God’s ways. Unless we let Him guide us to the newness of life, we have no hope in finding any new life. Unless we surrender ourselves to the hands of the Master, we are doomed to despondency.

The psalmist tells us how it is done, how we might gain the hope and help we need. He cries out to the Lord, *“Let us, your servants, see Your mighty deeds; let our descendants see Your glorious might. Lord our God, may Your blessings be with us. Give us success in all we do”* (90:16-17)!

God stands ready to help us, and yet He often allows our lives to become shocked back into reality so that we might see the destructiveness of this world and then begin to look forward to the joy of life in His ways. We can so easily become numb to the ways of God that it takes a big shock in our lives to get our attention so that once more we can begin to look at life differently. But we must be willing to allow God to touch our lives in this way so that He might move us beyond our own protective bubbles to see His great possibilities for us.

We see that in the life of the Apostle Paul. Paul had become so blinded by the life of a Pharisee that he was completely absorbed in it. He had closed himself off of fully understanding the Scriptures of God that he actually began persecuting the believers of Jesus. So God literally knocked him off his “high horse” (Acts 9) and blinded him as he encountered the living Christ while on his way to Damascus

to persecute more followers of Jesus. That shocking event transformed the life of Paul, reforming him into understanding who God really is so that as he developed a personal relationship with Jesus, he allowed God to change his life. So he became the world's greatest evangelist and apologist for the Lord Jesus Christ and he spent the rest of his life helping others find the power of the Lord Jesus in their lives. Everything he did from that moment on was so that the world might be transformed, and so that reformation might take place to bring us back into the ways of the Lord. Paul shared his own experience of reformation so that the Salvation of the world might be accomplished through Jesus Christ.

And we see the end result of his life in the words he wrote to the Thessalonians. Listen please to I Thessalonians 2:1-8. (READ 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8).

Paul acknowledges the trials and struggles that the world gives to us. He experienced them in so many different ways. He had been rejected from the Synagogues by those who were trapped in religion, he was beaten by the leaders because of his explanation of Jesus fulfilling the Scriptures, he was stoned by an angry mob to an inch of his life because they disagreed with him, and then he was imprisoned unjustly because a crowd began to riot around him because he presented Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior of the world. He had experienced such life threatening events that he could have certainly become mentally defective and silent, fearful of what might come next. But instead, he trusted in the power and authority and love and grace of God the Father Almighty. He tells the people, "*Even though there was much opposition, our God gave us courage to tell you the Good News that comes from Him*" (I Thess. 2:2).

Paul didn't let the opposition of the world cause him to shrink back and stop working for the Lord. Instead, he insisted upon trusting the Lord to give him the courage and strength needed to stand up to all that was going on around him and continue to tell everyone how much God loved them, even to the point of sending His Savior, Jesus, to take our sins upon Himself and pay the price for that sin, so that we could have eternal life as we put our hope and trust in Him. That is the Good News for ANY PEOPLE!

Even though he had endured such atrocities against him, Paul continued to travel and tell about God's love for all people, to anyone who would listen – Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old, powerful or powerless. He even used the situation of being imprisoned to take the Gospel to those who were guarding him, or those who were beating him, or those who were trying to shut him up.

So great was Paul's faith in the Lord Jesus, so close was his relationship to our Savior, that he wanted to give everyone the chance to find the same transformational reformation as he had received. It didn't matter what he received in return for his work as an evangelist, Paul knew that God would be with him, that God would protect him, and that Jesus would give him the right words to encourage and enlighten the hearts of the people to the ways of God Almighty.

So Paul appealed the people to listen to him, and then to accept his words of truth about Jesus Christ being the Savior of the world (I Thess. 2:3). He used the Scriptures to stand behind every claim of Jesus' position as the Messiah. Having been a Pharisee, he was well instructed in the Scriptures, so he used God's Word to open up the eyes of the people and enable them to see the truth of what he was telling them. At every city that he visited, Paul pronounced Jesus Christ as the Messiah, God's Savior for the world, and he would start in the Synagogues and then go to the pagans, the Gentiles. Paul wanted to help those around him out of their own mental defectiveness to bring them the life and joy and peace and love of the Lord our God. He was diligent in providing ways that the people could receive the truth and find their own lives released from their protective bubbles to experience God's presence in them. Paul wanted to release the people from their fears, from their hurts and from their oppressions, and he gave them Jesus Christ so that in Jesus, they could find hope and life and love.

Paul's motives were true and straight forward. There was no trickery in his words or in his life to try to coerce the people into accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord (I Thess. 2:5). He had no magic formula for the people; he gave them the opportunity for a relationship with the Savior of the world. Paul worked with truth and integrity to demonstrate the difference that Jesus made in his own life once he allowed Jesus to become the King of his heart. Paul wasn't trying to mislead others into a new

religion while seeking their trust and gaining their money in order to be in a position of power over them. He wanted to share what he had received in order that they might receive it, too.

Paul earned his own way, working as a tent maker and teaching about Jesus at the same time. He was careful to speak and live in ways that demonstrated the fulfillment of God's promise of giving us a Savior who would become the intermediary between God and us (I Thess. 2:4). He was careful to always lift up Jesus as the One who was God's Messiah. Paul never claimed that position for himself. He was only the messenger telling the truth about what God had already done.

But that didn't mean that he worked to please people. Paul gave the unashamed witness of the great work of God to the people. No matter how they received it, he was not going to water it down in order to make disciples for Jesus Christ. He was not going to compromise on any of the laws and commands of God, nor of the teachings of Jesus. He would stand by them regardless of how it made other people feel. Paul was not one to say anything or accept anything just to get people to accept Jesus. He laid it out plain and simple, but truthfully and accurately. No fudging on the principles of God's ways. There was no other way for Paul, and he was not about to share a false teaching just to make people feel better about themselves or make them happy. Happiness came as the people recognized their own sinful lifestyles, confessed it to the Lord Jesus, received His forgiveness, and then changed their lives to live in obedience to the laws and commands of the Lord. That's what brings happiness! Not following a watered down gospel that accepts anything and proclaims nothing. Only complete obedience to the Laws of God and the commandments of Jesus. God knows best what we need, not us.

And that's what he presented to the people of Thessalonica, and to us. Paul cared less about getting praise or accolades from people (I Thess. 2:6). His main goal was to be faithful to his calling as an apostle of Jesus Christ, teaching the Way, the Truth, and the Life to all those who would hear it and receive it.

It's like loving parents who strive each day to live in such a way that teaches their children the value of having Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They cannot live like the rest of the world and then say,

“This is what being a Christian is all about!” No, to demonstrate the life of a follower of Jesus, we have to separate from the ways of the world and live each day according to the guidelines and standards that He set up for us. And while the world tries desperately to teach folks that God’s ways have no meaning or purpose in our lives, as we live according to those ways of God and demonstrate the characteristics of true discipleship, we allow all those around us to see the dramatic difference Jesus makes in us as we trust in Him and live for Him.

So Paul invites us to follow his example, to be “*ready to share...not only the Good News from God but even our own lives*” with those around us. How are the people going to know the difference that Jesus makes in each of our lives if no one lives according to His laws and commands? How will the people see the need for Jesus unless we live so drastically different lives and be ready at any moment to share the love that Jesus gave to us?

But that requires that reformation takes place in our own lives, getting rid of all that hinders us and contributes to our own protective bubbles that keep us safely away from anything that might challenge or threaten us. It requires that we evaluate our lives and see where we are at with our relationship with the Lord so that we might be able to confess those fears, those hurts, those thoughts and actions that keep us from living boldly for the Lord Jesus. We must be willing to confront the lies and the false teachings that are around us and claim the truth as the truth. We must be willing to give our whole lives over to the obedience of Jesus, otherwise we give up calling ourselves followers of Jesus and call it like it is, our being followers of the world.

If we are going to follow Jesus in all His ways, obeying all His commands, THEN we can call ourselves Christians. But if we are not willing to give ourselves completely to Him, then we must stop using the name to make us something that we are not. If we live by the world then we are worldians, not Christians. Be bold followers of Jesus Christ every day, and in every way. Let’s pray together.

Father, break us out of our self-made protective bubbles of mental and spiritual defectiveness, so that we might live for You in all our ways, to the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord! AMEN.