

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN?

According to Solomon in Ecclesiastes 1:9, there is nothing new under the sun. However, we must not be misled into thinking that nothing changes.

For example, disease has been with us since the fall of man. However, in my lifetime the most feared diseases have not always been the same. When I was a child, I remember the dreaded disease to be polio. When that was tamed by vaccinations, cancer took its place. Cancer is still with us, although often treatable. Today, the new deadly disease is AIDS.

I have found in these three physical diseases a mirroring of our society's moral ills.

Polio was an affliction that crippled the body through a degenerative process. In parallel fashion, the moral evil of that day deformed society. But it was identified and disapproved of, and even those who participated in it knew it to be wrong.

Cancer is a disease characterized by the uncontrollable multiplication of cells. After the 1960s, activities that had once been opposed gradually became tolerated, and even glamorized as a necessary step toward freedom or progress. Participation in these behaviors not only became addictive, but those who practiced them sought to draw others in as well.

Cancerous evil is still very much with us. But today we face another evil, "no-evil." Behaviors are neither good nor bad. Not only do we give ourselves the right to do anything we wish, we are rewriting textbooks and laws to remove any standards that might interfere with our rights. We have become a society without immunities. We no longer know our own evil, and it is free to consume us.

*Diane Woerner
November 1986*

ROOTS

*... But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind
and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal
for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:13,14*

The other day on the way to church I noticed the first changing leaves of autumn and felt a sweet surge of nostalgia. My mind went back to the beautiful hills of Michigan where I was raised. Actually, because of my grandmother's death a few weeks earlier, I had been spending an unusual amount of time in the past, recalling faces and events, mentally slipping into the long-discarded clothing of my childhood.

In the midst of my reveries that Sunday morning came a gentle but distinct new thought. *Your roots are not in the past; they are in the future.* At first it seemed backward. My ancestors are my roots. I am the product of their physical and even spiritual natures. These, along with the circumstances, experiences, and choices of my entire life, converge to make me who I am today. What could it possibly mean to be rooted in the future, in something that hasn't even happened yet?

So I thought about roots. What are roots? What do they do? The first characteristic of roots that occurred to me was that they carry in them the identity of the plant. When you mow down a blade of grass, the roots send up another blade of the same kind. A drab, gnarled bulb mysteriously contains within itself the astonishing elegance of the iris bloom.

A second function of roots is to provide the plant with stability. Often a root system is as extensive below ground as the visible plant is above. A well-rooted plant never moves, but stands firm against the assaults of any storm. Third, roots nourish the plant. They draw water and minerals from the soil, and return stored food to each year's new leaves and flowers.

What would it mean, to find my identity, my stability, and my nourishment, especially spiritual nourishment, in the future? The best way I can explain it is to see my life not as a heaping up of circumstances and experiences, but as a journey toward a goal, toward that "upward call," toward my destiny of conformity to the nature of Jesus.

No one walks backward down a path, concentrating on the stones and ruts he's either missed or tripped over. Rather, he has in mind the destination ahead, even though it may well be out of his range of vision. To be sure, he's gained some useful wisdom about stones and ruts from the pathway behind. But far more significant is the motivation found in contemplating the end of the road.

How sad it is, then, when we become bound by the belief that our roots are in our past. This idea can take two forms. On one side, we may find ourselves thinking wistfully of better days, back before our failures or losses. If only we could go back to our childhood when the world was bright and fresh. On the other side, we may find in the past great hurts on which we tend to lay blame for all our present problems. In the first instance, we wish to escape *to* the past; in the second, we feel trapped by it. Our identity, our stability (or lack thereof), and our nourishment are directly connected to what we've been, for better or for worse.

But gently Jesus calls us to forget our past, to lay it down. He calls us to transfer our roots, the lifeline of our spirit, to the image He has in *His* mind of what He wants us to become. His vision of our identity never wavers. Our spiritual stability becomes the result of *His* faithfulness, not our own. And Hebrews tells us that because of “the joy set before Him,” Jesus was able to walk the painful pathway He’d been assigned here on earth. If the future nourished our Savior, it should nourish us as well.

Ultimately, everything in our spiritual life is a matter of choice. “This one thing I do,” says Paul. We can never choose our past; we must always choose our future. But when we are able to glimpse, with the eye of our spirit, that for which Christ has created us, the choice becomes abundantly simple. The past fades as a mist behind us, and the longer we gaze ahead, the more clear and compelling is His vision, His purpose, His choice, His reward.

Diane Woerner
September 25, 1995

FORGIVENESS

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Luke 6:37

Every night at bedtime, my mother would come to our bedside and pray with us, ending with the Lord's Prayer. My sister and I soon knew the words by heart, even though some of them were meaningless for many years. And we always prayed "trespasses."

I don't remember the first time I heard the "debts" version—perhaps at Sunday School or Bible School. At first there was just the challenge of getting my tongue ready for the right word. But eventually I began to wonder why there were two ways to say it, and more, what the two words had in common.

My only context for understanding "trespasses" was signs I'd seen tacked on trees. It meant you couldn't walk on someone's land, even if that land looked exactly the same, and exactly as inviting, as the land you could walk on. Because my parents never borrowed money, a "debt" was a library fine when I took back a late book.

Some thirty years later, while listening to a pastor teach on the Lord's Prayer, I gained an insight into the two words that I've never forgotten. When we trespass, we do something we should not do. When we are in debt, we are not doing, or not paying, something we should.

Perhaps God has sovereignly allowed both words to remain alive in our culture to enable us to see both sides of sin. Basically, sin is either doing something we shouldn't, or not doing something we should. As a consequence, there are also two aspects to forgiveness. We must not only forgive others for the things they do that are wrong, we must also forgive them for things they don't do that they ought to do.

With regard to the first part of forgiveness, we can learn best from the example Jesus gave us from the cross. "Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." It would seem to us they knew exactly what they were doing. They had singled Jesus out from a great number of criminals, and were pouring the focused wrath of humanity upon Him. They meant to kill him, as cruelly as they knew how.

And yet, of course, they didn't know. Nor do the people who wrong us really know. To be sure, like the mob at Golgotha, they are accountable to God for choosing evil over righteousness, and only He can forgive sin at that level. But Jesus seemed to understand that their actions toward Him were the consequences of their sin nature, which distorted and confused and ultimately destroyed their perception of reality and truth. No creature in his right mind would want to harm his creator. Only Satan has that agenda, and Satan was ruler of the land.

Thus it is appropriate for us to view those who have harmed us as being simply the tools of Satan to continue pain and destruction on this planet. They don't wish to harm us; he does. Their only actual sin is exactly the same sin that each of us has committed: they (and we) have chosen to reject the redemptive grace of God in some, or perhaps all, aspects of life. This is true sin, and as I said, it is sin against God alone.

Turning to the other face of forgiveness, the “debts” side, I find the finger of God pointing not to the person who has wronged me, but to me instead. I am angry at them because they have not given or performed in the manner which I have assumed they should. They haven’t met my expectations. *My* expectations.

Once again, Jesus is our example. As God of heaven and creator of the universe, He has the absolute right to everything that exists. By comparison, our rights are only second-hand rights, those He’s decided to share with us. But the consistent, compelling message of Scripture is that we are called to return all our rights to God, even as Jesus yielded His in humble submission when His father sent Him to earth.

The simplest way to discover unyielded rights is to examine what makes us angry. There is of course a place for appropriate anger, when the kingdom of God has been somehow violated, and we are called to intervene with passion. But most of our anger is well within the borders of the kingdom of self. We have been wronged. Specifically, we have been deprived of something we were owed or otherwise thought we deserved. Our employer didn’t reward our work properly. Our friends didn’t show up when we needed help. Our spouse isn’t meeting that extensive list of requirements we thought was included in the “happily ever after” clause of our marriage contract.

Thus forgiveness includes the forgiving of debts. God will forgive us for our continual failure to give Him that which is rightfully His, but only as we forgive others for not giving us things to which (from God’s perspective) we have no right at all. Forgiveness here includes the abandoning of all forms of pressure or manipulation that communicate to the other person our disappointment (or more honestly, our anger) for their failure to be or do for us what we desire.

The true test of forgiveness, either for wrongs done or “rights” not done, is not a change in the other person, but a change in ourselves. When we forgive, we lose our vulnerability to others’ mistreatment, and are sustained instead by the sufficiency of Christ’s power and provision. If we can learn to abandon ourselves to Him, trusting in His love, forgiveness will be as natural as breathing, and we will find to our joy that He has indeed given us the needs and desires of our hearts, according to His riches in glory.

Diane Woerner
September 29, 1995

THE SOLUTION TO SIN

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:8,9

When I was a young girl, I liked to draw. I drew horses and butterflies, birds and trees. I also drew pictures of Calvary. The pictures were always the same. I'd draw a hill with three crosses on the top. On the hillside around the crosses were gnarled, leafless trees. And in the foreground, at the bottom of the page, would be a stone fence with an opening in it. From that opening, winding up the hill to the center cross would be a path.

Several years ago while I was reading a book by Larry Crabb, those pictures of Calvary came to mind. I no longer have the book, so I can't recall exactly how he explained it, but I will never forget the truth I learned concerning the solution to sin.

Each of us as sinners stands outside the fence. When we see the opening in the fence, we must choose to stay outside or enter in. The choice is simply our acknowledgment that we have sinned. Unless we admit our sin, we are forever out of reach of the healing of Calvary.

As we begin the path toward the cross, however, we find the road to be very, very steep and difficult. To our relief, two side paths appear—one to the left, the other to the right. The name of the path to the left is, "It's not my fault." How wonderful! I can be excused from my sin, because I was abused as a child, or I have a hormone imbalance, or someone cheated me, or I got into a bad crowd, or ... and we wander off down the path. To be sure, we feel better. But alas, our sin is still with us.

On the other hand, some of us select the right-hand path. This one is called, "I'll try harder." Yes, yes, it was wrong what I did, but of course I won't do it again. In fact, I promise to read my Bible more, pray more, serve more, praise more, forgive more, give more.... Surely, a little more effort, a little more attention to detail, and this imperfection in me will soon be gone.

Regrettably, our sin nature is not ours by choice, and so it can't be done away with by determination or good intentions. Even if we somehow manage to suppress one manifestation of our sinfulness, another more troublesome sin will sooner or later appear.

There is however one other option left: God's simple, overwhelming, astonishing, eternal gift—the redemption of Christ. To receive this gift, we must make our way, all the way, to the foot of the cross. We will have to shed our pride. We will have to forego our logic, our preferences, our point of view. We will have to say no, unequivocally, to that part of us that would really prefer to keep just a tiny bit of our sin, since we really did rather enjoy it.

But as we set our minds and hearts on the purity and the promise of Jesus, drawn by His love, we will no longer be distracted by the side paths. We will begin to see our sin as He sees it, utterly ugly. And as we cast ourselves in humility before the cross, we will experience not only the miraculous freedom and joy of His forgiveness, but we will also discover supernatural cleansing that tangibly removes each element of our sinfulness as we yield it up to him.

*Diane Woerner
August 31, 1995*

HOT AIR BALLOONS

I've never shopped for a hot air balloon, but I suppose I would exchange a largish amount of money for something that comes neatly folded in a big crate or bag of some sort. At that point I would own the balloon, and it would be a complete balloon. However, it wouldn't be a "completed" balloon until the day when I could rig it all together, light the burners, and launch it up into the calm blue sky.

How we would sail! How gloriously the balloon would thus become all it was designed to be. It would have its own astonishing beauty, but it would also accomplish the reason for which it was created: to carry me. And, of course, it does none of this on its own, but only as I (hopefully) apply the skill and knowledge of burners to keep it successfully aloft.

Then eventually the balloon and I would return to earth, where it would crumple to the ground, lying there helplessly until it was refolded and returned to its storage place. Yet whether it is climbing into the clouds, collapsed on a field, or concealed in a closet—it is always my balloon. It never loses its identity nor its value.

Our lives as servants of Christ go through similar cycles. Once He has purchased us, we remain helpless until He prepares us—and then releases us—for service to Him. When all is ready, there will be glorious moments when our spirits billow out, and we find ourselves doing what He designed us to do. In those moments not only are we ourselves thrilled (and sometime others too may see and acknowledge our accomplishments), but it is also so amazingly easy to believe that God Himself is pleased with us.

But there always comes a time when the flight is over, and we lie flattened and away from the public eye. This may be followed by long months of storage (and perhaps cleaning or repairs). How tempted we are to become discouraged, to feel failure or rejection or abandonment.

Nonetheless, this ebb and flow of our Christian walk is as natural and right as the life experience of a hot air balloon. In the quiet moments between our flights, we must choose to remember that we are always His treasured possession. A balloon that might somehow try to fly on its own would be a terrible thing. It could become damaged, or even cause damage to others. It is our truest glory to simply trust in our Master. Whether aloft or at rest, we must learn to live in the assurance that He is using us for His perfect purposes.

*Diane Woerner
September 2002*