

WITHOUT GOD, LIFE STINKS

WHEN MY KIDS WERE IN GRADESCHOOL THEY PICKED UP AN EXPRESSION THAT WAS GOING AROUND AT THE TIME. WHEN THINGS DIDN'T GO THEIR WAY. THEY WOULD SAY: *"IT STINKS!"* I TOLD THEM ONE DAY THAT THEY MIGHT NOT KNOW IT BUT THEY WERE QUOTING THE BIBLE!

AFTER JESUS' FRIEND LAZARUS DIED, JESUS WENT TO HIS TOMB WITH LAZARUS' SISTERS—MARY AND MARTHA. JESUS GAVE INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TOMB TO BE OPENED BUT MARTHA OBJECTED, SAYING: *"BUT LORD HIS BODY HAS BEEN THERE FOR FOUR DAYS; IT STINKS!"* MODERN TRANSLATIONS USE KINDER, GENTLER LANGUAGE, LIKE THE NIV'S "THERE IS A BAD ODOR." BUT THE PLAIN TRANSLATION IS, "IT STINKS"—OR, AS THE KJV PUTS IT, "HE STINKETH!"

WHEN LIVING THINGS DIE, THEY DECOMPOSE AND WHEN THEY DECOMPOSE THEY STINK. THERE IS A STORY ABOUT DEATH OF THE GREAT COMPOSER WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART. [STORY OF MOZART'S DEATH & "DECOMPOSITION."] FOR PEOPLE OTHER THAN MOZART, THOUGH, DECOMPOSITION TAKES A LESS PLEASANT FORM.

BUT OUR BODIES ARE NOT THE ONLY THINGS THAT DECOMPOSE: EVERYTHING DECOMPOSES OVER TIME. CLOTH WEARS OUT; CARS BREAK DOWN; BUILDINGS CRUMBLE; STREETS GET POTHOLES. THE GREAT IRISH POET WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS PUT IT VERY SIMPLY: *"THINGS FALL APART; THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD."* OR IN ST. PAUL'S WORDS: *"ALL CREATION IS IN BONDAGE TO DECAY."*

WHY? WHY DOES EVERYTHING DISINTEGRATE OVER TIME? WHY DOESN'T THE CENTER HOLD? WHY MUST EVERYTHING FALL APART? THE ANSWER LIES AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF TIME—WHEN GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH,

FIRST GOD CREATED MATTER AND ENERGY. THEN HE ORGANIZED THEM INTO A HARMONIOUS SYSTEM. HE SEPARATED LIGHT FROM DARKNESS, SKY FROM EARTH, LAND FROM WATER, PLANT FROM ANIMAL AND ANIMALS FROM MANKIND. STARTING WITH CHAOS, HE CREATED ORDER. BUT WHEN MAN ALLOWED SIN TO ENTER THE WORLD, THINGS BEGAN TO TURN BACK TOWARD CHAOS.

IN GOD'S PERFECT WORLD—WHICH WAS CALLED THE GARDEN OF EDEN—THERE WAS ORDER, HARMONY, BEAUTY AND ETERNAL LIFE. BUT SIN OPENED THE DOOR AND ALLOWED DISCORD, DISEASE AND DEATH INTO THE WORLD—AS GOD HAD TOLD ADAM IT WOULD: *"ON THE DAY YOU EAT OF IT YOU WILL SURELY DIE."* AND WE ALL LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF ADAM AND EVE'S SIN—IN OUR BODIES, OUR RELATIONSHIPS, OUR SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, OUR GOVERNMENT—EVEN IN OUR CHURCHES. SIN INFECTS EVERYTHING IT TOUCHES, AND IT TOUCHES EVERYTHING. WE WERE BORN IN SIN AND SIN CLINGS TO US ALL OUR LIVES.

IN OUR SOULS WE ARE NEW CREATIONS AND WE HAVE ETERNAL LIFE, BUT IN OUR FLESH—THIS "BAG OF WORMS THAT HANGS AROUND OUR NECK" AS LUTHER CALLED IT—WE CONTINUE TO SIN. THE RESULT IS THAT WE SPEND OUR LIVES WRESTLING WITH DISCORD, DISEASE AND THE FEAR OF DEATH. AND AT THE END OF THE TRAIL

WE END UP LIKE LAZARUS: STINKING IN A GRAVE AND TURNING BACK TO THE DUST WE WERE BEFORE GOD CREATED US.

FOR A BELIEVER, THOUGH, THE STORY DOESN'T END WITH THE STINKING. JESUS CALLED OUT IN A LOUD VOICE: *"LAZARUS COME FORTH!"*—AND THE DEAD MAN AROSE AND WALKED OUT OF HIS TOMB, NEW LIFE FLOWING IN HIS VEINS AND A NEW SPIRIT ANIMATING HIS MORTAL FRAME. AND IT WAS ACCOMPLISHED SOLELY BY THE POWER OF GOD'S SPOKEN WORD! WHEN GOD SAYS, "LET THERE BE..."—THERE IS. LAZARUS DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO HELP. HE DIDN'T GIVE HIS HEART TO JESUS, HE DIDN'T SPEAK IN TONGUES, HE DIDN'T RESPOND TO A SPARK OF GOOD HIDDEN SOMETHERE IN HIS BODY. HE DIDN'T SAY THE SINNER'S PRAYER; HE DIDN'T EVEN REPENT OF HIS SINS. HE COULDN'T DO ANY OF THOSE THINGS BECAUSE HE WAS DEAD! ALL HE COULD DO WAS LIE THERE AND STINK.

BUT GOD'S WORD—"LAZARUS, COME FORTH!"—RAISED THE DEAD MAN TO NEW LIFE. AND WHEN HE WALKED OUT OF THE TOMB, JESUS SAID, *"TAKE OFF THE GRAVECLOTHES AND LET HIM GO!"* I LOVE THOSE WORDS! *"TAKE OFF THE GRAVECLOTHES AND LET HIM GO!"*

DEATH AND THE GRAVE HAD NO MORE CLAIM ON LAZARUS AFTER THE WORD OF GOD ENTERED HIS EARS AND GAVE HIM NEW LIFE. HE WAS A NEW MAN—RE-CREATED BY THE SAME WORD THAT CREATED THE SUN, THE MOON, THE STARS AND THE GALAXIES. THE SAME WORD THAT CREATED NEW LIFE IN US WHEN WE LAY DEAD IN OUR SINS.

AND JUST AS GOD RELEASED LAZARUS FROM BONDAGE TO DEATH AND DECAY, ONE DAY HE WILL RELEASE ALL CREATION FROM ITS BONDAGE TO DEATH AND DECAY AND BRING FORTH A NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH! BECAUSE HOWEVER LOUDLY THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS MAY DANCE AROUND THE EARTH IN HIS GRAVECLOTHES, THIS IS OUR FATHER'S WORLD!

IT'S EASY THESE DAYS TO GET DEPRESSED AND CYNICAL OVER THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING IN THE WORLD. DISILLUSIONMENT AND DESPAIR ABOUND—FED BY AN UNCEASING STREAM OF NEGATIVE NEWS. CORRUPTION KEEPS POPPING UP EVERYWHERE. NOTHING—AND NO ONE—IS SACRED. ALL MEN ARE LIARS. ONLY THE MEDIA REJOICE IN SO MUCH CORRUPTION. THEY ARE LIKE THE PEOPLE MENTIONED IN *PSALM 12:8*: *"HOW THE WICKED STRUT ABOUT ON EVERY SIDE WHEN VILENESS IS EXALTED AMONG THE SONS OF MEN."*

WITH ALL THIS MESS GOING ON A PERSON CAN BEGIN TO FEEL LIKE THE ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHER DIOGENES, WHO WALKED AROUND ATHENS WITH A LIT LAMP IN BROAD DAYLIGHT. WHEN PEOPLE ASKED HIM WHAT HE WAS DOING HE REPLIED THAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR AN HONEST MAN. THE CORRUPTION INFECTS OUR YOUTH AS WELL. BACK IN THE 1950'S, A SURVEY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS ASKED THE TEACHERS TO NAME THE FIVE BIGGEST PROBLEMS THEY HAD WITH STUDENTS. THE FIVE THE LISTED WERE: CHEWING GUM IN CLASS, RUNNING IN THE HALLWAYS, FAILURE TO DO HOMEWORK, CHEATING ON TESTS AND THROWING SPITBALLS. WHEN THE SAME SURVEY WAS ADMINISTERED IN THE YEAR 2000, THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS LISTED WERE: USE OF ILLEGAL DRUGS, CARRYING WEAPONS, TEENAGE PREGNANCY, SUICIDE AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE. HOW FAR WE HAVE COME!

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ORIGINAL SIN ARE MULTIPLYING AS MORE AND MORE PEOPLE—PEOPLE OF ALL AGES—ARE DRAWN INTO THE DEVIL’S DANCE. AND THAT’S WHY IT’S SO IMPORTANT FOR US TO REMEMBER THAT, AS WE SING IN ONE OF OUR HYMNS: *“THIS IS OUR FATHER’S WORLD—AND LET US NE’ER FORGET: THAT THOUGH THE WRONG SEEMS OFT SO STRONG, GOD IS THE RULER YET!”*

FOR THOSE WHO WORSHIP JESUS AS THEIR LORD AND SAVIOR, GOD HAS ALREADY BEGUN TO CREATE NEW LIFE OUT OF DECAY AND DEATH. LISTEN TO PAUL’S WORDS: *“WE KNOW THAT THE WHOLE CREATION HAS BEEN GROANING AS IN THE PAINS OF CHILDBIRTH, RIGHT UP TO THE PRESENT TIME...”*

EVEN NOW, GOD IS TRANSFORMING THE DEATH THROES OF A DYING CREATION INTO LABOR PAINS WHICH WILL GIVE BIRTH TO A NEW HEAVENS AND A NEW EARTH. THE GROANINGS OF A DYING WORLD ARE BEING TRANSFORMED INTO THE BIRTH PANGS OF A NEW CREATION! AND WHAT GOD IS DOING WITH ALL CREATION HE IS DOING IN EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US! PAUL CONTINUES, *“...AND NOT ONLY THAT BUT WE OURSELVES, WHO HAVE THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THE SPIRIT, GROAN INWARDLY AS WE EAGERLY AWAIT OUR ADOPTION AS SONS, THE REDEMPTION OF OUR BODIES.”*

WHEN GOD REVEALS HIS NEW CREATION, WE WILL BE THE NEW CREATURES WHO DWELL IN IT! GOD NEVER ABANDONS US. HE DIDN’T ABANDON ADAM AND EVE AFTER THEY HAD OPENED THE SPIGOT AND ALLOWED DISCORD, DISEASE AND DEATH TO POUR INTO THE WORLD. HE PROMISED THEM A SAVIOR WHO WOULD RESCUE THEM FROM THE EVIL TIDE AND DELIVER THEM INTO A NEW PARADISE.

HE DIDN’T ABANDON DAVID AFTER HIS GROTESQUE SINS AGAINST BATHSHEBA AND URIAH; HE FORGAVE HIM AND PROMISED HIM THAT HIS KINGDOM WOULD LAST FOREVER. HE DIDN’T ABANDON PETER AFTER PETER DENIED HIM THREE TIMES; HE RESTORED HIM AND MADE HIM AN APOSTLE. GOD NEVER ABANDONS US.

EVEN NOW, AS OUR FLESH IS GRADUALLY PERISHING ALONG WITH THE SIN IN IT, OUR SPIRITS ARE GAINING MORE AND MORE LIFE AND ONE DAY THEY WILL ASCEND TO HEAVEN WHERE OUR TRUE CITIZENSHIP LIES AND WHERE WE WILL DWELL FOREVER WITH NEW AND PERFECT BODIES IN A NEW AND PERFECT CREATION. APART FROM GOD, THERE IS ULTIMATELY ONLY DISEASE, DEATH AND DECOMPOSITION.

IF YOU WANT AN ACCURATE PICTURE OF WHAT YOUR LIFE WOULD BE LIKE APART FROM GOD, IMAGINE LAZARUS AFTER FOUR DAYS IN A WARM TOMB. AS MY KIDS USED TO SAY: IT STINKS.

BUT IF YOU WANT AN ACCURATE PICTURE OF WHAT YOUR LIFE IS LIKE AS A BELIEVER AND A CHILD OF GOD—IMAGINE LAZARUS COMING OUT OF HIS TOMB, SHEDDING HIS GRAVECLOTHES AND WALKING FORTH IN NEWNESS OF LIFE. GOD RAISES THE DEAD TO NEW LIFE ALL THE TIME. [STORY OF JILL]

THE WORDS JESUS CALLED OUT TO LAZARUS IN HIS TOMB ARE THE SAME WORDS HE CALLS OUT TO EVERYONE WHO LIES DEAD IN HIS SINS: *“RISE UP IN NEWNESS OF LIFE!”* AND FOR THE SINNER WHO HAS HEARD GOD’S VOICE AND RISEN UP FROM DEATH TO LIFE, JESUS SAYS, *“TAKE OFF HIS GRAVECLOTHES AND LET HIM GO!”*

AMEN.

Genesis 2:16-17

¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden;
¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Psalm 51

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother
conceived me.
⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the
womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret
place.
⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be
clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than
snow.
⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain
me.
¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your
ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of
bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your
righteousness.
¹⁵ Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your
praise.
¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I
would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt
offerings.
¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.
¹⁸ May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
¹⁹ Then you will delight in the sacrifices
of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your
altar.

John 11:1-6, 17-27, 38-44 The Death of Lazarus

11 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” ⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be

glorified through it.”⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.⁶ So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ...

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” ...

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”