

Life is like a river – 6th January 2019

2 Corinthians 4:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, ¹⁸while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The 4 questions

Everybody recognises that they need to change something, but very few manage to emerge any different over time. Rather than focus on changing things here are 3 questions we can ask the Lord in reflecting upon 2018, that if acted upon will cause change to begin to take place. They are:

What are we supposed to retain?

What are we supposed to renew?

What things are supposed to go?

What are we supposed to add?

I've begun asking the Lord these questions because I recognise that we live bound by time. Time that is like a river. Constantly flowing constantly change. As Heraclitus (c 500bc) famously said, "no one steps twice in the same river." The water is always flowing so the river you step in with one foot is not the same river you step in with the other. We are river-like in that way. The person you see in the mirror today is fundamentally different at an atomic level than the person you saw yesterday or the person you'll see tomorrow. If you are aged 24 or over, you are now disintegrating just a little every day! Your molecular structure is renewing slower than it is decaying.

The only constant is change. Every moment is new, and this is how we experience the passage of time. We fundamentally must let go of one passing moment in order to live in the next. The process of renewing in the physical world leads to death as we literally disintegrate. But as followers of Christ we should be seeing the opposite effect in our spiritual life. By leaving old things behind and constantly becoming new, we grow in spiritual maturity even as the outward man in perishing!

What Lord do you want me to retain?

Looking back at 2018, where did God show up? Where did he help lead me into new freedom? What lessons did I learn from you through the good things and the hardships that I can apply going forward?

[My testimony of the year] – hardship has produced deeper love and compassion

[Tom's testimony]

As Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 4, the suffering and wasting away is temporary. He knew the suffering he was experiencing was leading him towards the treasure of Christlikeness.

What does the Lord want me to renew?

We need to be asking the Lord how we adapt what we practice to who you are now,, not to who you were a year ago, 10 years ago, 50 years ago. Whilst we know that prayer, worship, scripture etc are good practices we can soon make them so habitual that they lose their life-giving power. We can adopt a posture of never questioning or revisiting issues of theology and in doing so forget how the Spirit can show us Jesus in a fresh and new way.

Sometimes we need new life to be breathed into something that has become habitual. If we stay curious, if we stay hungry, we stay alive, awake, and growing. When we let old patterns become lifeless rituals we become rigid and our spiritual growth is stunted. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the areas you have made lifeless rituals.

A couple disciplines can be helpful in this regard:

Making time to spend with Jesus.

It's great to believe that our life identity, sense of worth, security, significance etc is found in who Jesus says we are, but we actually need to experience the reality of those truths in His presence as we sit with Him and let Him love us. This is where we find and reveal the treasure in earthen vessels. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you Jesus afresh. Do that with a new sense of openness. We often inadvertently stuff God into a box that we can neatly understand and manage. Let me tell you, the finite cannot fully comprehend let alone contain the infinite God! If you think you know everything there is to know about the triune God, you need to open your spiritual eyes again! God the Holy Spirit can reveal to us Jesus in a fresh and new way. A deeper way, leading to deeper roots, greater humility and more fruit. But, only if you allow the Spirit of God to destroy the box that you put God into!

Spending intimate time with just you and Jesus enjoying him while he enjoys you. This is the centre of everything and is the fuel the Kingdom of God runs on. We can't rely on what our relationship was in the past. It needs to be constantly renewed. This is where we experience our true worth and significance to God and let it sink in and become real to us. The Spirit makes every experience unique and we get to experience the depths of God's love for us in a unique way.

[Challenge] For example, have you ever dared to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the feminine aspects of God? If both men and women were created in the image of God, then God has feminine qualities that we need to experience. Perhaps some of those qualities will lead to healing for us if we allow God the Holy Spirit to take us beyond the box we make for him!

2nd discipline – practicing responding to God in the present

Practice being aware of His constant faithful presence. Cultivating an attitude of surrender and of yieldedness to God's presence in every moment. Otherwise we end up as functional atheists, because our present awareness becomes atheistic (in other words living as if God isn't there). It is in the now that we live. It is in the now that we experience life. It is in the now that we respond to God, and to others. It is in the now we become aware of the beauty of God's creation, of comforting a distraught toddler, of responding with a kind word, of holding our peace and our tongue.

Practicing the presence needn't be solitary but is enhanced in community with others so we can mutually recognize that the 'now' is where God and reality live together. It wakes us up to God and can fill our hearts with gratitude for the present moment and give us the means to build and encourage one another

What does the Lord want me to let go of?

Ephesians 4: 22-24

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

There is a process of letting go mentioned in Paul's epistles many times. Letting go and taking up. Sometimes it seems to be that God is OK with something in your life for years and years and then all of a sudden the Spirit of God illuminates something and says "It's time to let that go". But God, you've never had a problem with that to date, why should I let it go? Because, child, now you are ready to let it go.

It might be a habit, something destructive to our soul, an attitude, a prejudice, a painful relationship, the approval of others. It needn't be something bad, perhaps a ministry, a position, a job. Perhaps you've always done the bible study or whatever, but now it just seems like the life it once had has gone. Perhaps it is time to let it go, so that God can give you something new to take up. Whatever it is, it just isn't appropriate for the season that God brought you into.

We are a river that's changing moment by moment and year by year. We need to listen so we know what to get rid of. If we're not aware, if we don't ask, then we'll just keep living the same way we've always lived.

Some things others may challenge you on. Listen, perhaps the Lord is speaking to you through them!

What does the Lord want me to add to my life that wasn't there before?

This can be very difficult because the path of least resistance usually doesn't include adding in new things. But life is a river, not a pond. A pond represents being closed to newness and a lack of growth. We need to be open to adding something new that will help us continue to grow and mature in our spiritual walk. New things can feel weird at first but have the potential to create beautiful effects in our life. If our picture of God has grown stale and un compelling, then adding imaginative and contemplative prayer may be a helpful way to renew and refresh our picture of God. If we're open to it, the spirit will show us new paths. This may be as simple as changing how, or where, or what we're doing while we pray or worship. Fasting from activities like social media, or from food for a meal or a day can also really awaken us to the reality of God around us all the time.

Summary

If we stay curious, if we stay hungry. If we adapt and renew. We will be alive, awake, and growing in our faith and practice. When we let old patterns dictate future behaviour, we get rigid and our spiritual growth is stunted. So use these questions to help you move your faith forward in Jesus and reveal the treasure in your earthen vessel! Amen