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DAYS OF HOPE

THE HELL I KNOW

by Jon Wells

Death is a necessary precursor for life. This simple truth permeates the natural world we live in. From snakes to cicadas, many creatures must shed their old, tight skins in order to grow. A female octopus will brood over her eggs for months, withering away and dying in the effort to protect the next generation. Our entire landscape turns stark and dead for months as bitter winds bring ice and snow. The lush opulence of green fields and flowering trees is impossible without all those dead leaves and naked branches. Death is necessary. New things cannot come until old things die. Jesus referenced this foundational natural principle as a picture of his own death, foreshadowing things that would soon come. "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12:24)

This principle applies to all of us as we move through the various seasons of life. I remember little of my kindergarten experience, but I do remember nap time. I'm not sure I really appreciated nap time as a wriggling 5 year old.

These days the prospect of a nap seems glorious! First grade brought sweeping changes, including the disappearance of our daily nap. Sadly, new things always come at the expense of the old. Our youngest child Lincoln is a fifth grader this year. His days of recess are all but gone, and I don't think he even knows it. This is how we move through life, grasping out to take hold of the new while we drop the old. Every college freshman striding out into an exciting new world grieves the loss of a great many things. Newlyweds suffer in many ways. Our career changes bring similar losses, killing friendships and favorite places for the sake of progress. Paul addresses this dynamic in his first letter to the church in Corinth. 'When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.' (1 Corinthians 13:11)

None of us is immune. None of us gets a pass. In order to step into new things, old things must die. The problem is, you and I are creatures of habit who desperately cling to familiar things. All of us exhibit a stubborn preference for all of those old things we know so well. It seems to

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COUNTERCULTURAL BY LOGAN STARK

If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:19).

Countercultural. I don't know about you, but for me, this is something hard for me to be. Just recently, I completed a hundred-day sugar fast with a friend of mine. The results were great! I discovered that I had more energy and I lost almost ten pounds. Yet, it was something hard to accomplish. I hadn't realized how much sugar I'd been eating, nor how much sugar is such a part of the American culture, until I took a break from it.

One of my resolutions for this year is to be more physically healthy. In some ways, I have accomplished this goal: I took a break from processed sugar for one hundred days, I've been cooking more and eating out less, and I've been cutting down on my portion sizes. But I have also had many slip ups this year, such as having trouble sticking with a consistent workout routine. Though I've made some mistakes this year, this is still a goal that I wish to pursue, but it's a hard thing to stick with. Why? One reason, because it's so countercultural to the typical American lifestyle.

We are bombarded with commercials for greasy, fast foods. The flashy colors of their stores are down almost every street. It also doesn't help that junk food is so much cheaper than healthy food at the supermarket. And the American culture doesn't leave a lot of time for exercise, because it pressures us to go-go-go. The busier you are, the more successful you are. There are so many pressures around us to not be healthy. Yet, if you want to be physically healthy, then you have to break from the typical American norms and go against the pressures of the culture.

The same is true of our spiritual health. We are bombarded with messages that go against the Bible. Our culture is saturated with ideas that are contrary to what Jesus taught. It doesn't help that we are pressured to be like everyone else. And the busier our lives are, the less time that we have for our God. There are so many pressures around us to not be like Jesus. Yet, if we truly want to live out our faith, then we have to break from the typical norms and go against the pressures of the culture. It won't be easy. As humans, we feel comfortable in a group mentality. We don't want to stick out and we don't want the possible consequences if we do. However, how will the Gospel be spread if we're not different? If Christians are just like any other American, then why would anyone else want to be like us? Therefore, I challenge you with the same challenge that Jesus gave to his disciples: be in the world, but not of it. The world is ready to cancel anyone who makes a risqué mistake, but the Bible teaches us to forgive (Matthew 6:14-15). The internet is littered with so much hate and division over differing opinions, but we're commanded to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:43-45). Culture teaches us that it's okay to just believe what you want to believe, don't bother anybody, but Jesus said, "Go, and make disciples" (Matthew 28:16-20).

It's not easy being countercultural. But as Christians, it's what we're commanded to do.

me this is a universal human tendency. We prefer what we know, even if what we know is ugly and brutal.

The children we work with in residential facilities have taught me how deep this desire runs. We prefer the abuse that we are familiar with to the kindness we can not understand. For so many of these kids, the ugly environments they grew up in represent a world that they can comprehend. They know how to navigate drunken, violent adults. They know how to respond to screaming, yelling, unpredictable fury. They are resourceful, feeding themselves and their siblings while mom and the boyfriend are passed out on the floor. They have been forced to master the most impossible environments, but calm and peaceful spaces irritate them. They will become disruptive, making noise and creating chaos to get back into their 'comfort zone.' One of the things that drives me crazy about the residential environment is the fact that an abused child will not hear you if you speak to her in quiet tones. You literally have to raise your voice and yell at her to be heard at all. She is so attuned to shrill tones and hateful comments that she is very often incapable of even hearing a softly spoken, kind word. These youth do not trust kindness, they are suspicious of peace.

Children who have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse often re-enact their own abuse. This perplexing behavior seems pretty universal. An outside observer must surely be confused. Why re-create such painful moments from the past? One of the more challenging aspects of residential care is the tendency of a molested child to sneak around at

night seeking for someone who will repeat this ugly behavior and molest them again. On a campus full of abused kids, you can imagine the complications of sorting out room and building assignments! These kids universally reenact their own abuse if they possibly can. Why? We love that with which we are familiar, no matter how ugly. We would rather live in the hell we know, than venture into a heaven we have never seen.

This universal human bias towards the familiar shapes our decisions more than we realize. We cling to old things by habit without realizing how deep our love for the familiar runs. But we simply cannot step into new things *and* also hold on to old things. Jesus addressed is this core truth when

John's disciples came to question him. They were asking Him about His methods, questioning why His ministry did not look like others they were familiar with. *Why don't you fast like we do?*

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."
(Matthew 9:16-17)

I suppose the conundrum of new wine in old wineskins may be a little lost to the modern thinker. We are all too attached to our plastic bottles. But Jesus' audience was more than familiar with the leather skins used to hold whatever liquid they were drinking and carrying around. He was making a specific point here;

THIS MEANS THAT ANYONE
WHO BELONGS TO CHRIST
HAS BECOME A NEW PERSON.
THE OLD LIFE IS GONE
A NEW LIFE HAS BEGUN
2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

The Hell I Know continued . . .

Jesus was doing something completely new. Old containers are often unfit for new things. If we are foolish enough to try to keep the old containers, we will quickly find that they are insufficient for holding new things. Again, we can look to nature to understand this. What chicken remains in her shell, refusing to hatch? (why, a dead chicken, of course!) What kind of cicada refuses to molt? What butterfly remains within his cocoon? Stepping into new things necessarily kills the old, and often abandons the old ways that we love so much.

So now I must ask you, dear reader. What are the old things that you are clinging to that make it impossible to step in to the new? It is amusing to see how unsettling this question is. Like a small child with his blankie, I fear that someone will take my familiar things and pry them from my fingers. My familiarity bias rages if I even consider the question.

What old things must I let go of?

The question is apropos for a child living in a treatment center. If that child ever hopes to have a decent life, old things must die. Old addictions, old ways of coping, old behaviors, old ways of thinking. It is simply not possible for that child to live out a healthy, connected, productive life, and also cling to all of these old things. New Wine simply cannot fit in an old wineskin. But I digress. Enough about them. . .

What about you? What old things must be released? What familiar, comfortable, old things are you clinging to? Have a conversation with Jesus. Change is scary, but change can be beautiful.