

Cold Comfort

by: Ronald L. Dart

I hope I don't shock you too much when I say this; the Bible is not a particular comforting book. Oh I know the hope it gives is comforting and I know the relationship with God that it offers is comforting, but one night I was paging through the Bible looking for some comfort and I wasn't finding much. I wanted to read something to make me feel better and I wasn't finding it. You know how it goes from time to time the black dog gets on you. Winston Churchill called his occasional bout with depression his black dog and there are times when you're just down and you just need something to make you feel better. I didn't find it, anyway it was a moment of revelation for me, don't get me wrong there are places in the Bible where I find great comfort. Somewhere I got one of those Bibles that have a list in the front, if you're feeling this way read this scripture, if you're feeling down read this scripture or if you've had a great loss read this scripture but even that list points to the fact it's not everywhere you find these things. The Bible is definitely not a feel good book, now it was after that I was doing some studying in the prophets that something else dawned on me.

God never sent a prophet to people to tell them how well they were doing.

No prophet ever came on the scene and said; Hey God sent me down, thus saith the Lord you people are really doing well, so when a prophet showed up on the scene it was generally bad news. King Ahab had the picture for example.

(NIV – 1Kings 21:20, 21)

He saw Elijah walking his way and he said; **“So you have found me, my enemy!”**

He knew what was coming down and it was confirmed by Elijah response to what he said

“I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. I am going to bring disaster on you. I will wipe out your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free.” That's not really what I would call a comforting scripture even if you're not Ahab. Elijah was not your smooth slick preacher, he was a hairy man he wore leather and I fully believe that if he were to appear on the scene today that he would ride into town on a Harley Davidson motorcycle. Now where do you find comfort in things like this?

(NIV – 1Kings 21:27)

Actually it's there, well sort of there, Ahab repented at least after a fashion. **He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.**

God looked and said, would you look at what Ahab has done, and God relented somewhat and he said he would defer the terrible things that he prophesied to the next generation. Now that's called comfort I guess, but maybe it's better than no comfort at all.

There is however one prophet who does speak of comfort and it would be unusual if you hadn't heard of this man or heard what he had to say. His name is Isaiah and he wrote the words that are found in that marvelous aria in Handel's Messiah, **Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.** (KJV – Isaiah 40:2)

So words of comfort, yea but they come at the end of a long period of chastisement and correction. They're a people that have been battered and bruised and finally now at long last are being comforted after having received at Gods hand double for all of her sins.

Look for long term Comfort

So when you pick up your Bible to read you are not picking up short term comfort, what comfort you find in the Bible and you do find it, is long term. The apostle Paul put it this way writing to the Corinthians he said: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable". You'll find that in 1st Corinthians 15 Verse 19. So what you're finding from Paul is, Oh yea we have hope yes indeed we can take comfort but not in this life we got to look a long way out in the future, if in this life only we have hope in Christ we are a miserable bunch of dolts.

I'm stepping gingerly around the edge of something very important one of the biggest and most persistence questions that have dogged people down through this generation. I'm considering why it is that we have so many trials so much pain in this life. I mean after all we have repented of our sins we've turned to God we begin to live his ways we accepted Christ, you think since I've done that things would improve for me. It slowly dawned on me over time that God is not very concerned about my comfort.

CS Lewis said something interesting in this regard, it's a story he told about what he did when he had a tooth ache when he was a little boy. He knew if he told his mother about the tooth ache she would give him an aspirin to dull the pain and he could get to sleep but he really resisted telling his mother that he had a tooth ache. Now why would he do that, well he knew she would give him the aspirin and she would take him to the dentist the next day. He said you know dentist, once you let them in your mouth they find all sorts of things that need fixing and that process is sometimes very painful.

A little historical perspective from R.L. Dart

You know some of us had parents who had it very hard and in some cases perhaps your dad came home from the war and he swore he never wanted you to have to go through

what he had gone through in his lifetime. And it's an old song that parents who had a hard life want to spare their children all of that if they can and so they will if they're able they will give their children the moon. Where I went to high school this was back in the early fifties, there was no parking lot at school because the only people who had cars who came to school were teachers. Well how did kids get to school, I had to walk two blocks and get on a city bus. I don't remember if I had a card so I could ride free or if I was a student it only cost me a nickel or a dime but it was special. The bus when by my house and then right by the high school so I didn't need the yellow bus I just rode the public bus along with people going to work as most everybody else in my high school. Houston at that time had a good bus system and it was all we needed, no one could afford cars, now when I drive by the high school here in Tyler I see a huge parking lot full of cars. They're not teacher's cars they're student's cars and it's the perfect metaphor for what maybe wrong with the present generation.

We talk a lot about baby boomers but there are two very difficult problems with and for that generation. One there is just a whole lot of them and that's going to become a problem when they come to their social security years. There's another problem, their parents who fought in the war and remember the great depression, did not want their children to struggle like they had to struggle. They wanted to give them everything and sometimes it's complicated by divorce. You know a man and his wife have gotten a divorce and she's rearing the kids and he's off over here earning a living paying child support and he's really concerned that these children will continue to love him. He gives them whatever they want, he pays for their college education, he's buys them a cars, he does all these things for them and works like a dog for them, denies himself, perhaps because of guilt.

This here is something we need to get a hold of and never forget this God is not like those parents, God does not want us to have it easy. I realize that takes a lot to get your mind around because you got all these children gathered around, you see them growing up, you want them to have it easy and you don't really want them to have it hard. And God looks down on us and says there's no way you're going to have it easy and metaphorically speaking God expects us to get a job and pay our way as soon as we are able.

My wife and I were prewar babies we came of age during World War II when sacrifice for the common good was a value everyone understood, our fathers were working men. We felt when we graduated high school we had to get a job; our parents could not afford college so we had to pay our way. So my wife went out and got a job working as a clerk at Brown and Root. I tried and ran around from one job to another and finally I joined the navy as much as for any other reason so I could get the GI bill. This would pay for an education which my parents could not afford. It was good for us to have to do that, it was good for us to accept that responsibility. My wife got a job and paid her room and board to her mother all the time she still lived at home. Now her mother put it all in a saving account and she gave that to her when she got married but that wasn't really in the deal. What was in the deal, she felt obligated to pay for her room and board at home, and kids today don't seem to feel that way. Now how can I say that God does not want us to have it easy, isn't salvation free well yes it is and I'll explain to you why God does not want us to have it easy.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Now how can I say that God does not want us to have it easy, didn't Jesus say my yoke is easy my burden is light? Yes he did, isn't salvation free, yes it is but you can't earn it. Then why is it, having been saved we still have so much trouble and are worse than other people. No Jesus said just because something bad happens to people it means they're any worse than anybody else. The truth is Christian people and good Christian people still get sick, good Christian people still have people break into their homes and kidnap their children. Good Christian people still get mauled, raped and murdered and pillaged by bad people. We have to understand that God is after much more than saving our miserable hides, he's going to make us son's he can be proud of and in order for that to happen we have to learn the meaning of very important words.

The seven letters to seven churches.

In the 2nd and the 3rd Chapter of the book of Revelation we have seven letters to seven churches, most people if they spend much time reading the Bible will know about these churches. There is not a single one of these churches that is faultless and that really shouldn't surprise anybody and if a church is composed of people it's going to have problems it's going to have faults because people will have faults. As far as that's concerned there's not a single one of us that is faultless. Well after the evaluation each of these churches receive in turn and the correction is offered to them and their future is somewhat spelled out for them.

**He who has an ear let him hear.
To him that overcomes**

Church #1

I give to eat of the Tree of Life.
In the mist of the paradise of God.

The spirit says this to the churches: *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.*

It's that word overcomes that tells that something is going on here. Because if life is easy there is nothing to overcome, if everything is provided for us there is nothing for us to work for. If everything is handed to us on a silver platter what incentive do we have to work to produce to become creative to become more like God, well that's just one church you'll find that in Revelation 2 Verse 7.

Church #2

Shall not be hurt by the second death.

Then the letter to the 2nd of these seven churches he says: *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.*

The right to the tree of life, the not being hurt by the second death these depend on our overcoming.

People who have faced the challenges of life.

Now I was really struck by this many years ago. I think I was preparing a sermon I believe it was in Memphis Tennessee and I was thinking thru this section of scripture and it dawned on me that what he's talking about is people who are winners, people who have faced the challenges of life, the people who have faced the challenges of adversity and they adapt they overcome they struggled and they become much stronger Christian than they would otherwise ever do. So is it fair to say that he doesn't want us to at least have it too easy.

Church #3

I give to eat the hidden manna.

And then there is the third church of the series, also in Revelation 2: *He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.*

This is obviously still looking ahead to the resurrection of the dead, as we read it talks about hidden manna and a white stone with a new name on it. Jesus also mentioned it somewhere that he has a new name and we get one too. But it all depends on that one word overcomes.

Church #4

I will give him the morning star.

Revelation 2:26 the forth in these series of churches, to him that overcomes and does my will to the end I will give my authority to the nations. *And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star.*

Wow that one caught my attention cause the one thing I would love to be able to do in the resurrection is to run out to the farthest edge of the universe and stand right on the end and see all the stars and everything God has made and to look out and see nothing, I'm curious I'm consumed with curiosity about those stars out there, how they come to be how they come into existence how they go away.

Church #5

I will confess his name before my Father,
and before his angels.

In Revelation 3 another church is spoken of. *He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.*

Who, he that overcomes, the winners these are the people that are going to be there.

Church #6

I will make a pillar in the temple of God.

Later in the same chapter the sixth of the seven churches. *Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, [which is] new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and [I will write upon him] my new name.*

He shall go out no more and write on him
the name of my God and the name of the
of the city of my God and my new name.

For who is this done, him that overcomes.

Church #7

I will grant to sit with me in my throne.

Finally the letter to the last of these seven churches. *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.*

To every single church and every single one
of us who overcomes.

Now over the years I have heard endless speculation about the meaning of these seven letters, most of that speculation has been fruitless and often misleading but there is one thing that is perfectly clear if you can hear it. Every single one of us, every single church has something to overcome, what God wants us to do is to struggle, improvise, overcome and become stronger in the process.

**Pick up your burdens and carry your cross.
Just as Jesus had to carry his.**

Why should we think that our road should not be hard, why should we think that load should not be heavy, why should we not think that we should not pick this up and not carry it, Jesus carried his cross why should we think that we should not carry ours. Jesus words to his disciples at the last supper are instructive.

The summation of all things that will be for those who overcome the challenges and perils of this life, a Comforter or Counselor and His Peace.

I have no idea why the King James translator chose the words they did for John 14 Verse 16, Jesus to his disciples said this, and this is the King James Version. If you love me keep my commandments *And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;* the word is not comforter, its counselor, the road ahead is not comforting it's challenging. Jesus said: *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

OK then if Jesus is giving us his peace how come Paul and his companion Silas end up beaten, with many stripes on their backs thrown into the slammer with their feet put in stocks and left for the night? Well now wait a minute Jesus said I'm not giving you the peace the world gives you, the peace is not like that, it's the kind of peace that allowed his disciples Paul and Silas to sing hymns in the night and finally led to the conversion of their jailer but it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy at all to endure that beating and it was sure misery in that prison in those stocks they were in but God was with them through it all.

The true vine, the branch that bears fruit and be not of this world.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every [branch] that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

Now I don't know all together what all that means except that cutting things out of your life, cutting off limbs and branches that keep you from bearing fruit is probably going to be a painful process.

In this same speech he said: *If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before [it hated] you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.* Hey, the world will hates you. *Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you;* there's no smooth road here.

You know one of the things that night I was looking around paging through the Bible to find encouragement along with the fact that some people were down on me. Didn't like what I was doing, didn't like what I was saying. Jesus said, look you're going to have to go through this, if the world hates you, you got to understand this it hated me before it hated you.

Later he said: *These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.*

They are going to do all this stuff to you because they have not known the father nor me.

Here you got it, how can we say that God wants us to have it easy when Jesus says look at all the trouble you're going to have, you're very likely going to get yourself killed. Some of you are for the sake of the Gospel and for telling the truth to the powers of this world.

Later he says in Chapter 16 Verse 31 of John, he said: *Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation:*

Now here it is laid out for us clear as a he could possibly give it, if you're looking for comfort there's only one place you're going to find it, if you're looking for peace there is only one way it's going to come to you. In Christ, in the world you shall have tribulations. Well take a look out the window we are in the world and we are going to have troubles.

And Jesus closes it out this way, he says; *but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*

Now there is that word again I have overcome the world, I have won. You know it's interesting he puts this in the past tense as though he has already done it. Yet he has that long night and long day ahead of him of his suffering and of his death.

The prayer of Jesus for his disciples.

Chapter 17 of John contains this marvelous prayer where Jesus prayed for his disciples asking God to intervene for them to keep them safe, there is a lot of comfort in these words of Jesus but they are not easy words. One of Jesus parables is very instructive here, he says: which of you having a servants plowing or feeding cattle will say to him when he's come in from the field go sit down and get yourself something to eat, no you tell him, get me something to eat and after that you can eat. You going to thank him for that, so likewise you when you have done these things which are commanded of you say we are unprofitable servants we have done what was our duty to do. Now this is something we fail to understand about the law of God, obedience is your duty not your merit, you can't earn salvation by the law the law defines the bare minimum standard of conduct in the world.

I watched a television program a few nights ago it was a Johnny Cash anthology I'm sure it was prompted by the new movie out Walk the Line. It was composed of films and videos of performances interspersed with commentary of performers and others who knew him. What struck me about it was how much better he was at the end than he was at the beginning, he was somewhat beat up and scared inside and out but his work was by far better and even as his voice faded it carried more conviction than it ever had. We don't all get better as we age, some of us give up the fight, some of us are embittered by the struggle and some of us seem to wine a lot some feel sorry for themselves some read the Bible in the vain

hope it will make them feel better. The Bible is not about making you better it has nothing to do with your feelings.

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