

RANSOMED
HEART
ministries

September 2007

Dear Friends,

“How do we best understand life?”

I was meeting with a young woman a few months back, talking through some hard times in her life. She asked me what I thought was the truest way of looking at life. “My husband thinks life is just hard. I’m feeling that it’s sort of random. We’re not really good for each other right now. What do you think?” O, the beautiful timing of God. I’m suddenly aware that Someone else is in the room. I had been going through some very painful things myself, and it felt like there was a sort of pregnant expectation in the air.

What will I say? What *do* I believe?

“God wants us to be happy,” I said, “But he knows that we cannot be truly happy until we are completely his, and until he is our all. And the weaning process is hard.” I may have been playing the role of counselor in that moment, but I’m feeling like God arranged the whole encounter for me.

“The sorrows of our lives are in great part his weaning process. We give our hearts over to so many things other than God. We look to so many other things for life. I know I do. Especially the very gifts that he himself gives to us – they become more important to us than he is. It’s not the way it was supposed to be. So long as our happiness is tied to the things that we can lose, we are vulnerable.”

This is *so* core to the human condition, and to understanding what God is doing in our lives.

We really believe that God is there to provide for our happiness, provide us with a good life. It doesn’t occur to us that we have life backwards. It doesn’t occur to us that God is meant to be our all. And that until he *is* our all we are subhuman. The first and greatest command is to love God with our whole being. And yet, it’s rare to find someone who is completely given over to God. And so normal to be surrounded by people who are trying to make life work. We think of the few who are abandoned to God as sort of odd. The rest of the world (the ones trying to make life work) seems perfectly normal to us.

The past year has had a great deal of pain for me. There has been incredible blessing too, but we’ve been through some really hard stuff. My accident last fall, where both my wrists were in casts for two months. The loss of our beloved dog Scout. Some very painful betrayals by someone we love. But what I noticed was that I was far more upset by these things than I ever am when God seems distant, when I seem to be losing my grasp of *him*? What is it with us? I am just stunned by this propensity I see in me – and in everyone I know – this stubborn inclination to view the world in one and only one way:

As the chance to live a happy little life.

Now, don't get me wrong. There is so much good and beautiful about the world, even though it is fallen. And there is so much good in the life that God gives us. As Paul says, he has given us all things richly to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17). In Ecclesiastes, Solomon says that to enjoy your work and your food each day is a gift from God (Ecc 2:24). We are created to enjoy life. But we end up worshiping the gift, not the Giver. We seek for life and look to God as our assistant in the endeavor. We're far more upset when things go wrong than we ever are when we aren't close to God.

And so God must, from time to time, and sometimes very insistently, disrupt our lives *so that* we release our grasping of life here and now. Usually through pain. God is asking us to let go of the things we love and have given our hearts to, so that we can give our hearts even more fully to him. He thwarts us in our attempts to make life work, so that our efforts fail, and we must face the fact that we don't really look to God for life. Our first reaction is usually to get angry with him, which only serves to make the point. Don't you hear people say, "Why did God let this happen?" far more than you hear them say, "Why aren't I more fully given over to God?"

We see God as a means to an end, rather than the end itself. We don't see the process of our life as coming to the place where we are fully his and he is our all. And so we are surprised by the course of events.

It's not that God doesn't want us to be happy. He does. It's just that he knows that until we are holy, we cannot really be happy. Until God has become our all, and we are fully his, we will continue to make idols of the good things he gives us. Like a child who throws a fit because he cannot have a toy, or watch TV. In the moment, he could care less that his mother adores him. His world is out of sorts. His heart is not in the right place. He needs his mother's love far more than he needs the thing he's made an idol of.

Whatever else might be the reason for our current suffering, we can know this: "The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 13:3). We are so committed to arranging for a happy little life God has to thwart us to bring us back to himself. It's a kind of regular purging, I suppose. A sort of cleansing for the soul.

Now, I am *not* suggesting that God causes all the pain in our lives. I don't believe he pushed me off my horse to make a point. In fact, I believe he saved my life. But pain does come, and what will we do with it? What does it reveal? What might God be up to? How might he redeem it? Those are questions worth asking. As my friend Dan says, "don't waste your pain."

"There is no happiness except in God, and ourselves united with him." Pascal

May your heart come to love God more this year than ever before.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'John' written in a cursive, flowing style.

John