

HOPE FOR BORN LOSERS

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At any given moment in your life, the only news that the Lord has for you is good news. But you are being bombarded with the bad news that Satan wants you to accept and believe. If you are a teen in school, he wants you to believe that you will fail that test that's coming up, or that the boy or girl you really like will reject you, that you won't be able to get a good job, that you'll never be able to drive a decent car.

I don't need to elaborate further, for you already know his repertoire of doom he specializes in. Believing Satan's bad news makes for an unhappy life and you don't want that; and the Lord, your heavenly Father, doesn't want that for you.

Why can I be so bold as to say that the only news the Lord has for you is good news? And this is not only for teens: it's never too late for teens already grown up to learn to believe the good news that the heavenly Father has for you.

Do you know some discouraged youth who needs help before he/she turns to alcohol or drugs? Tell that youth the truth about God. Even some Bible translations twist the gospel out of shape! And for sure, some churches do. Give that youth some honest truth of the Good News of God's pure, unadulterated gospel. If Bill Gates gave him/her a million dollars, it wouldn't be so valuable a gift.

Being a Born Loser is grist for a popular comedy strip, but in real life it can be painful. Everything

poor Abraham Lincoln tried to do was a failure until he sort of stumbled on to being President of the United States. Even there he suffered immense pain. In a sense, Booth's bullet was merciful. But the Lord had given him and Mary a few moments of restful conversation and pleasure in a carriage ride that fateful Friday afternoon; spring blossoms were everywhere.

Some dear people are a Born Success; and if that's you, these thoughts may be a waste of time. You've known nothing but sunshine from day one. But the Bible is full of Born Losers, people who had deep spiritual convictions that ran counter to everybody in their circle. The Bible tells how to accept defeat graciously. It's a precious achievement!

Abel with his older brother Cain, the big guy, heads the list; Sarah, the lady who couldn't get pregnant during decades of frustration; Jacob who messed everything up with a spiritual vision he couldn't implement.

Joseph, the classic case, probably 17 or 18 when he was dealt a tragic teen-disaster (teens sometimes at that time endure the torture of hell—extremely painful years). Joseph lost his “election” when his ten brothers sold him as a slave into Egypt. Thoroughly humiliated, brought to near despair by this “providence,” he endured with fidelity and honor, and was eventually “reimbursed” by “providence.”

David the one Born Loser literary-minded enough to leave us a precious library of Born Loser history. David was forced to endure not four years of

“political” exile (as Gore probably faces), but ten long years of being hunted as a wild beast by King Saul. He too was eventually “reimbursed” by providence.

Another was Jeremiah who just could never get into sync with the national leaders. Always the man out. Jeremiah’s humiliation was lifelong. He never was granted any kind of “reimbursement,” and had to die in humiliating exile, his entire life apparently a total failure. His bitter cup to drink was never sweetened.

Here is that word of the Lord that comes through Jeremiah, ready for you to choose to believe with all your heart: “I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer. 29:11). You may ask, How can I know this is addressed to me? I have made wrong choices, I have done evil, I have broken the Lord’s holy law; maybe I’m done for!

Read the context of what your heavenly Father has just told you: the Lord’s people in Jeremiah’s day had done gross evil (the book of Jeremiah is full of the story). One very bad thing: the entire nation had committed the equivalent of national adultery. And very many of the people had gone on and committed the personal deed, as well (vs. 23). Yet the Lord wanted them to repent and accept His forgiveness; Jeremiah was pleading for a national repentance; so with you, the only “thoughts” the Lord has for you are “thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Yes, you may know that you have sinned; you deserve only failure and pain and disappointment; but the worst sin you can commit is to abandon your heart to anger against Him and reject His forgiveness. It’s not His fault!

Now let the “grace of God that brings salvation . . . to all people” teach you to say “No!” to that hellish temptation (Titus 2:11-13; cf. NIV).

People who consider themselves born-losers often try to mask their pain by the pursuit of “love”. It’s a truism said by many, including Billy Graham, that the world is morally becoming like Sodom and Gomorrah. Entertainment is sex-permeated. What God has created holy, an image of Himself, is dragged in the mud. For many, sex has become an obsession, the only thing to live for, an idolatry. Pornography has become an addiction.

Of all addictions, sex is probably the most persistent to overcome because the allurements remains forever. But the Savior of the world has not abandoned us. He became one of us, “in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). This means that He has power to deliver from even a sexual addiction.

He has left for us in the Bible the story of one who was so terribly addicted that way that she is described as being possessed by “seven devils.” The “seven” indicates she was so far gone that she was beyond anyone’s therapeutic help. A cast-off wreck of humanity. Her name: Mary the Magdalene.

It’s obvious she didn’t know herself. She thought she wanted sex, but what she wanted was love. Not infatuation, not idolatry, but love. She had

concluded that there was not a man in the world who knew what true love is, hence her extreme bitterness of soul. She must have particularly hated the man who had originally led her into sin and then abandoned her, or rather, had driven her into exile in order to save his own “holy” reputation. In her despair, she saw herself as nuthin’ goin’ nowhere; other people trampled her in the mud; she hated herself, too, and lowered herself as far down as she could go. The seven devils swirled about in her soul, captivating every thought.

Then she met Jesus, and discovered agape, an unselfish love, a love that leads its possessor to die on a cross. Her soul had almost been totally obliterated, but there was a tiny remnant left that responded: she wanted what Jesus had!

He can reveal His agape to everyone for He loves us all alike, but there has to be on our part some response of recognition. Some connection deep down has to be made, something reciprocal. Some switch has to be turned on or the electrical power cannot flood the house. It was a long battle Mary had—seven prayer sessions with Jesus Himself. At last the “seventh” devil was cast out, and she was free. He still saves, today. But all seven devils must be let go!

Maybe you have never thought of Jesus Christ in that category. Everything, everything, against Him. Herod tried to kill Him when He was a Baby; growing up as a child, the village kids at home heard He was illegitimate and taunted Him. He couldn’t help that, and such helplessness is what makes being a Born Loser so frustrating; when you

endure it from childhood you are marked forever in your face.

What was Jesus like as a teenager? Jesus of Nazareth was the best man who ever walked this planet. But did He ever have enemies! It was a puzzle to Him when He was a Boy, why people hated Him so much. He meant no one any harm, yet He seemed to be a lightning rod that attracted people’s animosity, and He couldn’t help it.

Could any healthy teenager today really be like Him (what we say “Christlike”), and not be a fanatic, an oddball, a misfit, a recluse, so “different” that he/she just couldn’t be “human”?

Have you ever seen chickens peck one of their number that was sick, wounded, or somehow “different”? Were Jesus’ fellow-teens in Nazareth inclined to want to crucify Him even then? How could any teenager today follow Him truly and not end up re-“crucified”? Wouldn’t be fun, would it?

Here is a precious personal glimpse into the heart of Jesus—He says, “They that hate Me without a cause are more than the hairs of Mine head” (Psalm 69:4). Only one person in all human history could have said that; and it was literally true. Every human being (you included!) has come into the world with the natural equipment of ingrained enmity against Jesus: “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7). That’s our natural state if we never hear the gospel. Every human being rates one of those hairs on Jesus’ head!

As a Boy, He learned that it’s no fun when people don’t like you, and there seems to be nothing you can do about it. They were His “enemies

wrongfully,” He says. He had to act continually as though He had stolen things (which He had not done!) and be forced to pay back what He had never stolen! “I restored that which I took not away,” He says (Psalm 69:4).

He loved family ties as much as any of us (it’s not nice to be alone in an unfriendly world); but He “became a stranger unto [His] brothers and an alien unto [His] mother’s children” (vs. 8; yes, Mary had more children). The other kids weren’t picking on Him because He was weak or sickly, but for the opposite reason: He was the only “healthy” One in the family, and they couldn’t stand His constant example of being unselfish.

Sometimes He couldn’t help but cry; even as a Boy He carried a burden they had no idea about; but “when [He] wept, . . . that was to [His] reproach” (vs. 10). “When I poured Myself out in prayer and fasting, all it got Me was more contempt” (Peterson).

The hatred young Jesus was up against stuck to Him all His life until His same enemies tortured Him in His death. And here’s where I don’t know how to write it: He loved them and prayed for His enemies at His painful end.

“Lord, we don’t know how to follow Your Example! It’s not in us to love enemies. Hell is where everybody hates everybody else; please save us from it!”

Jesus’ teenage “born-loser” experience made it possible for Him to understand the millions of youth in many lands are so confused and disoriented by the social collapse that is enveloping our modern

world, that they have no hope of living long. “I’m nuthin’ goin’ nowhere” is their philosophy of life.

Often brought up in one-parent families in poor neighborhoods, they have been deprived of a healthy sense of self-respect, and hardly know the meaning of the word “love.” From babyhood they are merely tolerated, their very existence often resented. This is especially true in the economically depressed urban areas. They hardly view themselves as human beings, and hope is all but extinguished in their souls.

But they often have keen intelligence, and they are indeed human beings in whom has shown that “Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (Jn. 1:9). How does that Light shine into such darkened hearts and souls? God has many ways to shine it, because His Holy Spirit has not yet forsaken this sinful earth.

If Jesus were here in person as when He was with us 2000 years ago, walking the streets of our inner city, He would discern where there is in some human face the slight evidence of a hunger and thirst for righteousness, as when He talked with the woman at Jacob’s well in Samaria. And He would know exactly what to say to awaken hope, to fan into flame that tiny spark of yearning for salvation. He would “know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary” because He would have “wakened morning by morning . . . to hear [from His Father the wisdom to know] as the learned” (Isa. 50:4).

No, you and I are not Jesus; but we can learn from Him “how to speak a word in season to him that is

weary.” It takes more than Seminary training! That “word” will not be legalism, a recital of things the discouraged soul must “do.”

At least, not at first! There will be News of what God has done; assurance that although the person despises himself or herself, God respects him/her, and has already put His arms around him/her in love, already “made [him/her] accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6). It’s a Big Idea to say to someone who seems hopelessly lost, but we have been expressly commanded to “preach Big Ideas” to any person whom the Lord brings into our orbit of influence. O Lord! (a) please prepare us, and (b) give us the opportunity.

Jesus’ conscience made it impossible to get into step with His national and religious hierarchies, He was constantly at odds and couldn’t help it. Ridiculed, condemned.

Let’s say a word in behalf of those who sincerely want to follow Jesus yet meet setbacks, discouragements, frustrations, disappointments and feel themselves born-losers. It seems their prayers go nowhere. Could it be that perhaps God has not accepted them? They must stand Outside, watching the party going on Inside; if God has accepted them as members of His family, why are they tormented by doubts and fears?

Here is great good news for them: Jesus had precisely the same problem! And the biggest problem for a Born Loser to wrestle with is who he/she is. It would be irreverent to say that Jesus doubted who He was.

His was an up and down experience. The “up” was His baptism, the brightest, sunniest day of His life, for He heard this Voice from Heaven—“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). Who wouldn’t be on Cloud Nine forever after if hearing that?

But then, says Mark, “immediately” came the “down.” He felt Himself “driven . . . into the wilderness” of heart-rending temptation to doubt. (Elijah had a similar problem; his “up” was the glorious height on Mt. Carmel, his “down” came immediately when he fled to his “wilderness,” felt himself a total failure and wanted to die [1 Kings 18, 19]).

An awful temptation almost overthrew Jesus right after that glorious baptism. Was He indeed the Father’s “beloved Son”? “If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.” He was in agony, not only from physical hunger and weakness (when for all of us temptation is most fierce), but also spiritually.

The tempter wrung His soul with plausible Bad News logic and rationale: if You really were the Son of God, how could you be bereft of friends and help here alone in this desert with wild animals all around You, hungry, emaciated, forsaken? You look awful! This is no way for the Son of God to be! You must be that famous Enemy of God; if You really are the Son of God, prove it! Take a bungee jump off the temple pinnacle—settle it forever in Your soul when You see God rescues You! Then You’ll know You are the Son of God! Oh, scared to do it, eh? Okay, then give up; forget this

hallucination that You are the Messiah; You never heard a real Voice at Your baptism, You only thought You did. Join the crowd, the world; otherwise You'll never amount to anything! (Mt. 4:1-11).

A wise writer once made a statement that has recently come to the attention of many Christians around the world: "True Christians will have an experience like that of Christ in the wilderness of temptation, especially those who engage in rescuing souls from the snares of Satan."

Several significant factors made up the picture:

The Father had just acknowledged Him openly to be "My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." The principle: whenever one is on a pinnacle of faith one is almost immediately plunged into an abyss of temptation to doubt one's identity "in Christ."

All human appearances supported the contentions of the tempter. Christ was apparently forsaken of God alone in a wilderness with no companions except wild beasts (Mk. 1:13). His 40 days of fasting had reduced Him physically so that Isa. 52:14 was fulfilled: "His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men." Satan had a point: How can you think you are the beloved Son of God when You have been abandoned and You look wretched like You do? God would surely take better care of You if You were His beloved Son! Be sensible! Confess that Your idea that You are His Son is foolish fanaticism! The ultimate issue was more than mere physical appetite (although that was involved); the ultimate

issue at stake was His identity. If Satan could shake Him on that, His ministry and His coming sacrifice would be a failure.

The tempter disguised his identity, too. Satan appeared to be an angel of light fresh from the throne of God with a message of mercy for poor, suffering Jesus: "I have come to help You relieve Your hunger. If You are the Son of God, be sensible: act like it! Command that these stones become bread. You can do it! Why perish here right at the beginning of Your wonderful ministry?" Jesus had to decide who He was: so must you and I decide: who are we, "in Christ," by His adoption?

Finally, on His cross that barbed and poisoned arrow tip was shot at Him again: "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." Prove it by doing something no crucified criminal has ever been able to do! Easy, if You are the Son of God! How can You otherwise expect us to believe You? That moment was His lowest "down."

We can be reverent and say that "even doubts assailed the dying Son of God" on His cross. This is why understanding "the truth of the gospel" is so important for you if "doubts assail" you—you have been redeemed by Him, you have been adopted into the family of the Father (Eph. 1:4-6), on His cross the Son of God pronounced over you a "judicial verdict of acquittal" (Rom. 5:15-18, NEB); your born-loser-ness has been superseded by His salvation-success. Say Thank You to Him. He bore your loser-ness.

But He wasn't "out." He chose to believe the Word. Even that Voice at His baptism was nothing more

than a direct quotation from the Bible words of the Old Testament (Ps. 2:7; Isa. 42:1). You hear that same Voice speaking to you in the Bible. Do like Jesus did—make a choice to believe it.

Who do you think you are? Are you one of the 99 sheep that never went astray? You had good parents, went to church all your life, never robbed a bank, never been in prison, you've been a good person all your life? And like the Pharisee in the parable in Luke 18:10-14, you are humble enough, grateful enough, good enough, decent enough, upright enough, to thank God that you are not like other people who do get lost, especially like the down and outs who have done all sorts of bad things and been alienated from God all or most of their lives?

Yes, I'm mixing up my parables here—that's as bad as mixing metaphors—but how about another parable, the lost son, the prodigal son? Who are you? Are you the dutiful son who never wasted your life, never had to feed the pigs, never left home?

Now please don't misunderstand me. I am NOT recommending that you do all these bad things. But my question is this: do you know how to sympathize, to empathize is a better word, with the people who have done all these bad things, who have wasted their lives, lost the joy of fellowship with God and with the saints, and have wandered in darkness in the dark world? Jesus has special sympathy for people who have wasted their lives and whose hearts are filled with remorse. They are the special objects of His compassion. In fact, they are the ones He came to save. The poor publican

who beat upon his breast and wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven, who prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" he is the one who went home justified. Straightened out, put right with God.

Why does Jesus have such special sympathy for such people? There is only one possible answer: because He repented on their behalf; He took their nature; He was tempted like they are tempted; He is their High Priest. Hebrews 2:14-18. And now He invites you to share His love and sympathy for all the sinners in the world, for all the prodigal sons feeding the pigs, for all the publicans who cry out for mercy. And when you begin to share His compassion, the joy of your own life has only begun.