

BEING CONVINCED

Ted Schroder, January 10, 2010

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38,39)

The act of examining and weighing up has been concluded and a firm conviction has already been reached – the all-embracing, unshakeable certainty that has been attained in faith. St. Paul is persuaded, convinced, sure, that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ.

This kind of certainty does not come easily. When it seems to come easily it smacks of arrogance, of presumption. People can become too sure of themselves and their opinions. Spiritual certainty can be very off-putting. If someone seems to know all the answers it is difficult to have an honest dialogue with them. They put themselves above contradiction. When Job was suffering he did not need his friends to come and tell him what was wrong with him. They claimed to know all the answers to his problems, all the reasons for his suffering. However, if a person struggles with the doubts and questions that trouble him, looking at all sides of the problems, honestly pursues the truth, and is open to what God may reveal to him through his experience, through the teaching of the Scriptures, and his human knowledge, and reaches some conclusions on which he can take a stand, that conviction may be respected for it is hard-won and not superficial.

On the other hand, many people are not willing to do the hard work to win through to a conviction on which they can base their lives. Agnosticism is the comfort zone of many, who prefer *not* to know, rather than to have to declare themselves. There are many things of which we can legitimately be unsure. We do not know the answers to everything. But we need to know some things if we are to make sense of our lives. We need to know if there is something more to this life than meets the eye. “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1)

St. Paul is convinced that life is worthwhile, because of the love of God he has experienced in Jesus Christ, who died for his sins. He is convinced that nothing that this world or the next, success or failure, good or evil, heaven or hell, the present or the future, can do to him, can take away from him the eternal source of love that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. So convinced is he of this fact that he wants everyone to know it, everyone to share this assurance, that makes life worthwhile and complete.

Perhaps you have to suffer before you can reach this conviction. Perhaps you have to reach bedrock before you can build a faith that will last. Perhaps you have to come to the end of yourself before you discover your destiny. That was true for Ernest Gordon, who was captured during World War II and sent to work by the Japanese building the Burma railway. The conditions were brutal. The guards would execute any prisoners who appeared to be lagging. Many more men dropped dead from exhaustion, malnutrition, and disease. It is estimated that 80,000 men died building the railway, 393 fatalities for every mile of track.

Phil Yancey, in *A Skeptic’s Guide to Faith* (173-176), summarized Gordon’s story. Ernest Gordon felt himself wasting away from a combination of beriberi, worms, malaria, dysentery and typhoid. Paralyzed and unable to eat, he was put in the Death House, where prisoners on the verge of death were laid out in rows until they stopped breathing. His friends rescued him and cared for him in a bamboo addition to their hut.

“The prison camp was a laboratory of survival of the fittest, every man for himself. Prisoners fought over the few scraps of food. Theft was common. Men lived like animals, and hate was the main motivation to stay alive.

Recently, though a change had come. During a tool inspection the guard thought that a shovel was missing. He threatened to kill the detail unless the thief confessed. One enlisted man stepped forward, stood at attention and said, “I did it.” The guard beat him to death. That evening, when the tools were inventoried again, the work crew discovered a mistake had been made: no shovel was missing. One of the prisoners remembered the saying of Jesus, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) Attitudes in the camp began to shift. Prisoners started treating the dying with respect, organizing proper funerals and burials, marking each man’s grave with a cross. With no prompting, prisoners began looking out for each other rather than themselves. Theft grew increasingly rare.

Gordon sensed the change in a very personal way as two fellow Scots volunteered to come each day and care for him. After weeks of tender care, Gordon put on a little weight and, to his amazement, regained partial use of his legs.

The new spirit continued to spread through the camp:

‘Death was still with us – no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip. We were seeing for ourselves the sharp contrast between the forces that made for life and those that made for death. Selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy greed, self-indulgence, laziness and pride were all anti-life. Love, heroism, self-sacrifice, sympathy, mercy, integrity and creative faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life, turning mere existence into living in its truest sense. These were the gifts of God to men...

True, there was hatred. But there was also love. There was death. But there was also life. God had not left us. He was with us, calling us to live the divine life in fellowship.’ (Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars*, 105ff.)

As Gordon continued to recover, some of the men, knowing he had studied philosophy, asked him to lead a discussion group on ethics. The conversations kept circling around the issue of how to prepare for death, the most urgent question of the camp. Seeking answers, Gordon returned to fragments of faith recalled from his childhood. He had thought little about God for years, but as he would later put it, ‘Faith thrives when there is no hope but God.’ By default, Gordon became the unofficial camp chaplain. The prisoners built a tiny church, and each evening they gathered to say prayers for those with the greatest needs.

Gordon’s books (*Miracle on the River Kwai*, and *To End All Wars*) tell of the transformation of individual men in the camp, a transformation so complete that when liberation finally came the prisoners treated their sadistic guards with kindness and not revenge. Gordon’s life was changed. As a result of his experiences he gave his life to sharing the love of God in Christ with others. He became a Presbyterian minister and ended up as the Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University.”

Ernest Gordon was convinced that nothing could separate him from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ who became his Lord and Savior. St. Paul was convinced. What are you convinced of? Are you convinced of the transforming love of Christ? Have you examined and weighed up the evidence for it. Where are you on your search? Can you reach a conclusion and a firm conviction? May the all-embracing, unshakeable certainty of St. Paul be yours as well.

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