

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

The Dangerous Love of Ease

by Greg Morse

He couldn't imagine life without his handkerchief. Not that he lived a life that required a handkerchief, mind you; it was the principle of the matter. He lived in his hobbit hole — his very comfy, fully furnished home in the hill — and had no interest in traveling into the untidy, uncomfortable, unpredictable unknown.

As Christians living in the West, one temptation we face (often being unaware that we face it) is the temptation to become comfortable, cozy, content, altogether uninterested in anything that might threaten the repose we've constructed for ourselves. We live as Bilbo Baggins in the Shire of church history, largely tucked away from its many dangers and discomforts. We believe ourselves safe, as Tolkien wrote of the Shire in *The Hobbit*, so “swords in these parts are mostly blunt, and axes are used for trees, and shields as cradles or dish-covers; and dragons are comfortably far-off (and therefore legendary).”

With all of America's remaining imperfections, we enjoy more freedoms, riches, luxuries, technologies than any people before us. We are the envy of ancient kings: We can travel across the globe in hours, our text messages and emails fly circles around their letters and messengers. We have mattresses, air conditioning, furnaces, meat with most meals, chocolate as a casual dessert, toothbrushes and deodorant, dentists and hospitals, morphine and antibiotics, and toilets. Even many in the lower class carry super-computers in their pockets. Starvation here is all but eradicated. Our poverty is not like historical nor biblical poverty.

God has given much common grace. Added to his material giving, he has bestowed on us the ability to choose our governors, worship freely (more or less), and be tried under a justice system far superior to most nations, past or present. Even common Christians today wouldn't easily trade places with the royalty in 1 or 2 Kings, and not just because we live under a better covenant. We are unspeakably prosperous.

Dark Side of Prosperity

Yet there is a dark side to prosperity. The love of wealth is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10). That is why the wise man Agur, for example, prayed *not* to become rich, “Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God” (Prov. 30:8-9).

He has learned from Israel's history which played on repeat: first blessing, then forgetfulness, idolatry, discipline and exile, repentance. From the beginning, Moses warned the people of growing fat and forgetful: “Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Deut. 8:11-14).

We see the same temptation at the end in Jesus's epistles when he rebukes the prosperous church of Laodicea for their lukewarmness, “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:15-17).

Well-Fed by the Fire

We face the peril of becoming flabby, uncourageous, and complacent pilgrims. Ease tempts one to love our luxuries and count radical living for Christ as “unwise” and “reckless.” Although I like to think I am more like Gandalf or Thorin – warriors who endure stone beds and scanty meals, biting weather and armed enemies for an urgent mission – I see in myself more pre-adventure Bilbo than I like to admit. When invited to go on an uncertain adventure, I, like him, say inwardly, “[I] have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!”

Yet this spirit is contrary to our Lord’s call. He has commissioned me (as every Christian) on a grand quest – to extend a kingdom, to rescue lost souls, to fight back shadows (and the dark spirits they hide). This adventure bids me to exchange handkerchiefs and comforts for hardships and crosses (Luke 9:23). He assigns me to sacrifice self to meet others’ needs, put what is earthly in me to death, confront brothers entangled in iniquity, count my life as cheap compared to his glory, stand against the likes of the world, the flesh, and Satan, and, should it come to it, to leave all behind and die for his name. Daily he beckons into the vast beyond – even when that is merely across the street to speak the gospel to my neighbors.

When Christ comes like a thief in the night, how many of us will he find in our robes and slippers, sitting content by the fire, whispering to ourselves, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry?” (Luke 12:19)? I know I quietly hope, from time to time, that Jesus might be content to supplement an American life. That I need never be late for dinner. And by this fire, the dragon’s fierce persecutions, the imponderable rates of unborn executions, the peril of unbelieving neighbors, and the multitudes of lost souls tumbling from this world without ever hearing of Christ all seem comfortably far-off.

Learn to Face Abundance

How often do you recognize, let alone withstand, the temptations that come with plenty? The temptation of respectable worldliness? The temptation to love your life in this world? Few things flatten the virility of Christianity like halting along the way, making camp this side of the Jordan. To get comfortable. To get fat. To get entangled in civilian pursuits. To get away from serving for King and heavenly country. To lose sight of the mission, to no longer have the stomach for warfare. To be overly fond of our favorite armchairs and television shows.

The application for most of us is not to pack up and move to Papua New Guinea (though it may be for some). We will not all go overseas and escape our Western Shire. Instead, most of us God calls to live faithfully in our circumstances. We must *learn* – and this is counterintuitive – how to face abundance. “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:12-13).

We all can imagine facing lowliness and hunger and desperately needing the Lord’s help. But notice what other secret Paul needs to learn. He learned the secret to facing plenty. He needed help in the school of hard knocks *and* soft beds. And he learned the secret of how to abound without letting either corrupt him: he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him.

We might assume that there is no danger in a world that feels so safe. If no one is violently banging at the door, we assume we don’t need the same strength as poor or persecuted Christians. We do. We too need Christ’s strength in the prosperity we face. We need Christ and his strength to live focused on heaven, to risk reputation and fortune, and to make it clear in a land full of abundance, that we seek a better country – a heavenly one.