

Beginning Again

For many of us, our inner life has become a prison. We look inside ourselves and see a trap from which there is little prospect of escape. We see the cluttering of promises past that are unfulfilled. The soul has become a hole that grows deeper every day. Life is desperation. Hope has waned. There is no desire to live “Inside Out” because the inside is a mess more to be concealed than exposed.

My words are to those who need hope for beginning again. Let me share with you two recommendations of how to find hope for beginning again.

First, look at life as volumes and chapters. If you were to imagine that the inside of your soul is like the rooms of a house, then I invite you to walk with me into the library of your soul and to look about and see what is stored there.

On the one hand, you’ll see all the different volumes of books you have read throughout your life. You’ll see the books from childhood, like *Oliver Twist*, or the readings from adulthood, like the latest issue of the daily newspaper.

But there is one section of the library of your soul that is especially important. It is over there on the far wall. It is your autobiography — shelf after shelf of the cumulative history of your life. Everything is there, recorded from conception to this current minute. And there is something I especially want you to notice. Your biography is written in volumes. And, if you’ll take just one volume off the shelf and look inside, you will see that each volume is divided into chapters.

You may also notice that not every volume is the same size. Some are thick and some are thin. Few if any of the volumes are evenly divided by years. While one may cover 3 years the next covers only 17 days. None of them seems to begin on January 1 or conclude on December 31. Nor do they seem to go from one birthday to the next. Ob-

viously, there is some other basis for the volume and chapter divisions of your life and mine.

Do you see how the divisions are made? The volumes are usually divided into various periods of life. In the simplest of cases the periods may be infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood and senior adulthood.

But there are many other possibilities. For some, childhood may be divided into two major sections - - - one section prior to parents’ divorce and the other section after parents’ divorce. Or, the volumes of adulthood may be divided into sections of health and illness, or marriage and singleness, or childlessness and parenthood, or education and career. Everyone’s biography is divided differently. It is as individual as fingerprints.

Often there are major events dividing the volumes. Moves from one house to another; finishing one school and starting another; changing jobs; undergoing counseling; marriage; children; church changes. For example, you may have had a parent die during childhood and that ended one volume of life and began another. You remember it vividly. You can see the differences before and after, yet

you can’t recall the year without taking time to figure it out. That’s because the volumes of life are seldom measured by years. More often they are divided far more by relationships and events than by the calendar.

Some volumes are very, very short — maybe just a year in the army or a month in intensive care. It was a significant and memorable time, although it was not long in duration.

Some volumes are further subdivided into chapters. You may have, for example, a volume that is labeled college years. The chapters could be called freshman, sophomore, junior and senior, but, more likely, the chapters would be divided by other titles

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like English Major, Biology Major, French Major, Business Major or whatever your major was during your college years. Or maybe your particular chapters are labeled with Tom, Dick, Harry or Herb who are all the different guys that you dated during those college years.

Probably most chapters are at least a few years in length and most volumes are more likely to be decades than days. In any case, they are the memories of our biographies. They are the record of our lives.

But did you notice when you looked at the shelf called Biography in the library of your soul that one division is bigger than all others? It is obviously the greatest dividing point of all. The biggest divider of all is salvation. It's spoken of in II Corinthians 5:16-21 and says:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The moment a person becomes a Christian there is a central division to that person's eternal biography. All previous volumes are stained with sin and all subsequent volumes are cleansed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Everything that is before is seen from a purely human perspective; everything after may be seen from a supernatural spiritual perspective. The great transformation described in the verses cited above is that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." It is impossible to overestimate

the significance of the difference. It's the greatest change possible, even to the point of determining eternal destiny.

Now let me ask you what you see in that biographical section in the library of your soul. How many volumes are there? What are the major divisions that are uniquely yours? Which volume and chapter are you in now? But most important of all, can you point to the page where you became a Christian? Can you look up the time and place where you personally accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? Is it clearly recorded?

If you can't, let's write that page today! Right this minute, close your old volumes of sin and begin a fresh volume of salvation. How do you do that? Admit that your biography is filled with sin. Trust God to forgive your sin and make you a "new creation". Acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Then seal it with a prayer — right now! Did you do it? If so, write it down and mark this day as the dividing point of your eternal life!

There is a purpose to this volumes-and-chapters analogy. It is to help us understand that life need not be viewed as a complete unit. Life may be seen as a series of beginnings and endings. Some people consider that life is ruined because of a significant sin they committed when they were young. All the rest of life is worthless because of one tragic event. But that is not necessarily so! That volume of life may be closed and a new volume has begun. "The old has gone, the new has come!"

Other people do just the opposite. When things go well they assume that all the rest of life is safe. They think that the fortune they have gained can never be lost; the position they have attained will not be taken away; their marriage will always be blissful; the child that has done well in grade school will be no problem in high school. That is not necessarily so. These volumes may also close and new and different volumes may begin.

From the inside out, look at life as if in volumes and chapters. And, as you read and write your autobiography, listen to the words of God about new beginnings. He is the God of beginning again!

The oldest book in the Bible is the book of Job. Isn't it interesting that the first Bible book written

is about suffering rather than pleasure? Job was a man who had everything. His biography begins like this in Job 1:1-5:

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." This was Job's regular custom.

Job was godly, fulfilled, successful and healthy. Until one day when Job lost everything. His children were all killed. His wealth was destroyed. His health failed. And volume two of his biography was a great deal different from volume one! Job's situation was so bad that even his wife counseled him to "curse God and die!"

Job never had any idea what volume three would hold. Unlike those of us who suffer today, he didn't even have the book of Job to read for hope. He had no idea what would come next or how it would end. He just trusted God.

God gave Job a new beginning. The final paragraph of Job's biography says, "The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so he died, old and full of years."

Job's God was the God of beginning again!

Ruth is one of the smaller books of the Bible. In a male dominated society, it is particularly interesting that a volume of the Hebrew Old Testament should be named for and tell the story of a woman.

Ruth was a Moabite woman who married a Jewish man named Kilion. Marriage between a Jew and a Moabite was strictly forbidden by Hebrew law. Soon after their marriage Ruth's husband died and she was left as a young widow in a time and place where life was particularly difficult. Volume one of her story is bleak indeed. But Ruth trusted the God about whom she knew so little. She left her native land, forsook her religion and started a whole new volume.

The new volume included marriage to a fine Jewish man named Boaz who was a distant relative by marriage. Not only was the marriage of Ruth and Boaz a joyous one, but it was also a marriage that was blessed with children. But even beyond that, those children in turn produced the royal line that eventually led to the birth of David, who became the king of Israel. Ruth's God was the God of beginning again.

David is one of the most famous characters of the Bible. While no Bible book is named after him,

he was the author of many of the Old Testament Psalms. He was specially chosen by God to be king of Israel.

In I Samuel 16:7 we learn, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks

at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." This verse refers to David. When God looked at what was inside David, he liked what he saw. God chose David over all others to be king.

David's first volume was wonderful. Such promise. Such honor. Such thrill. Yes, his biography started well, but his later volume was sad! David abused the position God gave to him. He lusted after his neighbor, Bathsheba, even though

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she and he were both married. His lust on the inside led to adultery on the outside. His fear and sin on the inside sought to cover up what he had already done with another far worse crime in the murder of Uriah, the Hittite, the husband of his lover. That volume of David's life was dark and ugly. What a disappointing distance he had come from where his biography began. Yet God allowed David to close his painful volume and start a new one. David and Bathsheba married and became the ancestors of Jesus Christ. David's God was the God of beginning again!

And the list goes on. There's Peter, the disciple who three times denied Jesus. And yet that same Peter became the primary leader of the Jerusalem church. He stood strong against every threat and eventually died a martyr rather than again deny his Lord. He began again.

Saul, the Number One enemy of the first century church, imprisoned and murdered Christians for their faith in Jesus. Some of his chapters and volumes are among the most sinful and bloody of the Bible. But, he had a new beginning one day when he met Jesus Christ along the road to Damascus and his later volumes are titled "Paul the Apostle". He began again.

Or take John Mark, a young missionary protégé of the Apostle Paul who left the apostle and headed home. Paul labeled him a "deserter", "a missionary dropout". That volume of John Mark's biography doesn't read very favorably. But there were new volumes to come when Mark the deserter became Mark the author of our second Gospel and Mark the missionary colleague of the Apostle Paul. He began again.

The point is clear that the God of Job and Ruth, of David and Peter, of Saul and John Mark is the "God of beginning again"! And that God is our God, too!

He's the God of our new beginnings. None of this is to say that our old volumes can or will be rewritten. What is done is done. The ink is dry. But all of this is to say that no volume or chapter of the past needs to be last! Our God of Beginning Again is ready for us to close out present chapters and finish up former volumes and begin a new page

in a new book.

In the dismal days of the 7th century B.C., the prophet Jeremiah wrote the words of Lamentations 3:22-23: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." God is the faithful and merciful God of new beginnings!

I have written several books over the years. The process of authorship taught me many lessons. One of the greatest of the discoveries was that writing a book is very hard work. I have gained a new respect for anyone who writes a book about anything. It may look easy to some, but it is actually easy for none!

Life is like that! Writing your biography, living your life . . . it's hard! It may look easy to some, but it is actually easy for none!

In the writing, in the living, of your biography, which volume are you in? Is it time for a new beginning? Think now about what it will take to properly complete the chapter you're in. Don't walk away from it unfinished! Finish the current chapter for sure — and then get set for beginning again!

What's your outline for the new chapter you're going to begin? What would you and God like to title the upcoming volume? Get ready! Get set! Get going — with the "God of Beginning Again"!

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