

# Chapter 22

## God's great intention

Years ago when I had just moved to a new area a family with young children welcomed me, their latest arrival being a pretty little girl. A few decades passed and she then introduced me to her own little girl – the image of her mother at the age when we had first met. We sometimes see a young boy whose ways of standing, walking or talking reminds us so much of his father. Perhaps this brings home two of the sayings of Jesus: 'I and the Father are one', and, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'.<sup>1,2</sup> Jesus was God-made-man and in him we are shown the divine image. For those who have decided that, whatever it costs, they want to follow him whole-heartedly, we'll now take a closer look at God's intention for us as shown in Jesus.

### Made in the image of God

Right at the beginning of the Bible story we are told how, as the climax of his creation, God made both men and women in his own image and until they disobeyed him they had walked and talked with him as his companions.<sup>3,4</sup> We have read how the honest but disturbing record goes on to report how generation after generation repeatedly failed to live up to God's image. He still loved his people and wanted to restore that original harmony, but they kept disobeying, resisting his warnings, choosing other gods or worshipping idols they had made for themselves. Finally Jesus, God-made-man, opened the way to restore that broken relationship.

In previous chapters we have seen how, between them, the Father and the Son planned and perfected this offer of restoration. Jesus gave himself in our place as a ransom, paid as the price of our sin, his resurrection confirming our justification (remember chapter 15?). By trusting him we are given a fresh start and strengthened by his Spirit to live a completely new life as children of God.<sup>5</sup> The intention is for us to be restored to the original image and as our knowledge of our creator and obedience to him increase, the likeness to him will increase

as well.<sup>6</sup> As all things were created through the one made in the image of God, his firstborn and only Son,<sup>7</sup> his coming to live on earth has provided the perfect picture of the future likeness intended for us.

## The great intention

The flesh and blood model expressed by the Son of God helps us to understand better how the Father longs for us, his adopted children, to grow up enabled by his Spirit to become like his firstborn. Whatever it may cost, the result will be worth it.<sup>8</sup> Yes, *God actually wants us to become like Jesus!* – transformed into his likeness, our minds changed to think and will as he does.<sup>9,10</sup> What an intention – and, we may add, what a hope! Yet what God intends he is also able to fulfil. Earthly parents plan lovingly and patiently for their children and so does our heavenly Father.

In that last reference from Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, when he spoke of transformation he chose the Greek word *metamorphosis*, meaning a total change of shape or character. It is the same word as that used scientifically for the astonishing change in shape undergone when a tadpole slowly turns into a frog or a caterpillar into a chrysalis, out of which will struggle the butterfly. The struggle is what strengthens the fly's wings but can also attract the attention of a hungry bird. In the same way a developing tadpole can meet its end, even when already showing a shadowy frogginess. Many a medical student has been shocked to see how a legally aborted foetus is already recognisable as a baby on the way, so unlike the dividing cells of only a few months ago. At each progressive stage there are threats to normal development for all living things and some never complete it.

Examples from natural history give a picture of the great change Paul was thinking of when he spoke of our spiritual development being a metamorphosis, with all the associated changes and challenges involved. Unlike caterpillars, tadpoles and developing babies, the Christian's metamorphosis is not to bring about a physical change but a spiritual one. The intention is that we change from being egocentric to Christocentric, gradually starting to reflect the image of Jesus here on earth. We are also assured that our future resurrection body will be like his.<sup>11</sup>

As a shadowy likeness to him is developing, our spiritual enemy the devil is always greedy to put a stop to further progress at any stage and by any means.<sup>12</sup> The Holy Spirit within will strengthen resistance to his tactics and help progress towards maturity. In addition when others become aware that a young Christian's growth is threatened and faltering, they need to stand alongside, in person and through prayer.

### Giving up or toughening up?

Threats and difficulties are part of normal experience but the way that we face them can either hold up development or encourage it. Paul gives examples of both reactions in one of his letters from prison. There he had at first been well supported by a man called Demas, but later wrote sadly to Timothy that Demas had left him 'because he loved this world'. The enemy had attacked his weak point, his desire for an easier life. In his place, Paul sent for Mark 'because he is helpful to me'.<sup>13, 14</sup>

Yet there had been a time when the young Mark also deserted Paul, possibly culturally shocked by the goings on in Cyprus and homesick (and seasick?) on his first venture from home.<sup>15</sup> His cousin Barnabas had taken him along on that trip and, as a great encourager, stood by him in the crisis that later arose despite what that would eventually cost him.

### Being an encourager

We'll take a little diversion to think more about Barnabas for a few minutes. His name means 'Son of Encouragement' and he first appears in the book of Acts as a sacrificial donor from Cyprus.<sup>16</sup> When the church had heard about Paul's Damascus Road experience Barnabas believed in the reality of Paul's conversion when others doubted.<sup>17</sup> Seconded to Antioch there was so much to be done there that he went to track down Paul in his Tarsus hideout and took him back for a gap year of teaching experience in Antioch (where the name Christian was first used). From there the Antioch church commissioned them, first to take aid to famine victims in Judea and then to act as missionaries in Cyprus.<sup>18</sup> It was after this Cypriot mission that Mark left them while Barnabas and Paul went on further. The Jewish hostility they met, including near lethal stoning,

would surely have put off young Mark even more but was the start of Paul's mission to the Gentiles, a move blessed by the Jerusalem church leaders. All this is reported in Acts 13-15.

Barnabas must have encouraged Paul immeasurably as he helped him to develop an appetite for future missionary journeys and see the start of the outreach to Gentiles. It is therefore sad that when Barnabas suggested giving Mark a second chance to travel with them again, Paul vetoed the idea. They had such a sharp disagreement over it that they split up, Paul's still dominant spirit probably overriding Barnabas' gentler disposition.<sup>19</sup> Cousin Barnabas then took Mark back to the place where his courage had failed (not a bad principle, like riding the horse that threw you) and no doubt continued to be to him the encourager he had been for Paul. Apart from a passing reference in Paul's first letter to Corinth, the New Testament makes no more mention of Barnabas. Yet we have a whole Gospel written by Mark! He had been kept from dropping out by someone faithful and humble enough to take a back seat.<sup>20</sup> When eventually imprisoned in Rome it is good to read that Paul sent for Mark, evidently realising how much he had matured, as by then he must have done himself. He was even willing to give Mark the testimonial he sent to Timothy with the request.

As we grow up spiritually we too will learn to rely on God's strength, supplied by his Spirit at work within us. We need not shrink from whatever kind of growing pain we may experience as, like Mark, this can lead to greater maturity and works of service. The pain of a surgical operation should lead to greatly improved health. In the same way we gradually learn to trust that God's creative hands are at work in our times of stress to bring about his perfect plan for our lives.

We can resist change but God has purpose in it

I live in an area of Britain known as the Potteries, made famous by the renowned English potter Josiah Wedgwood and others. I once took some overseas visitors to see a potter at work. As he rolled some dull looking clay into a ball he started a running commentary: 'I first have to work on the clay to soften it up before I can shape it', he began.

One of the visitors asked, 'Do you already know what you want to make?'

'Yes', said the potter, 'but some clay is rather hard, or still has bits of grit in it, and that all makes it more resistant. I can't go on until it is softer'.

We watched him squeeze and knead the clay, just as a baker might treat a lump of dough before it goes into the oven. Then, with both hands firmly holding the softened lump on his spinning wheel, he skilfully started to mould it into shape. It was fascinating to watch, until he suddenly took the clay off the wheel and began to knead it again.

'It isn't coming right yet,' he explained. 'Sometimes, it doesn't go to plan, and I can't make the special thing I had in mind. I may have to make something plainer, though it will still have a use. It depends how the clay responds to me'.

This time, though, we watched in wonder as the original lump of clay slowly changed in his hands to become a beautifully shaped jug, attractive as well as useful.

'I'm just going to put my initials on its base, and then it will be ready for firing,' said the potter, 'It will be the only one of its kind and people will recognise it as my work, but it will have to go through the fire to firm it up. If it stayed soft it would be no use for anything at all.'

As we watched and listened, I could no longer keep quiet. 'You know', I said, 'You are reminding me of something in the Bible about God being like a potter and we are like the clay in his hands'.<sup>21</sup> Our earthly potter looked up at me with a twinkle in his eye, but said no more. I realised that he had perhaps deliberately been giving us a parable that needed no more comment.

The Master Potter knows what he wants to make of each one of us but has to overcome our resistance and sometimes accompany us through painful times before he can finish the work. His plan is to shape us into the unique models he has intended, unmistakably marked with the Maker's name to identify us as his workmanship. A young man

suffering badly from unrequited love was reminded of the potter's intention as he handled the clay. He burst out, 'That's just what it's like. I'm like a lump of clay with feelings!'

There is, of course, a big difference between a lump of clay and a human being. The clay has no say in what is going on, it feels nothing, and its resistance is something intrinsic to its nature. In contrast, we can choose to resist or resent what is happening to us, forgetting that whatever the immediate cause God has allowed it. As we slowly learn to lay down our resistance we find that in our Lord's loving hands the painful pressures of life have shaped us into something better fitted for service – if only to have grown more of his Spirit's fruit of long-suffering.

We left the potter and his wheel with newer insights about the possible creativity at work in some of life's difficult patches, once committed to God's purposeful hands.

## Growing pains

As children mature some things have to be unlearned as well as learned. It is a rare child who has met with no painful times as they grow and develop and a rare adult who manages to avoid such times later on. Yet even should they include the fires of persecution our Maker does not desert us.<sup>22</sup> As we all learn to respond more trustfully to our heavenly Father's firm but loving hands he gradually helps us, through his Spirit, to become more like his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In time his mark on us will become clearer. His greater goal is for all his followers to be recognisable as his united body on earth.<sup>23</sup> This is not always easy.

Our natural reaction to any discomfort is to moan and groan even when we might have brought the trouble upon ourselves. I sometimes think that such reactions are like the squeaking and squawking of musical instruments in an orchestra before a great performance gets under way. Of course we do not always enjoy being moulded or tuned in to God's purposes, but with his help we slowly learn to endure even unjust suffering with patience, trusting the end result to him. In this we

are following our Lord's own example.<sup>24</sup> As his crucifixion was followed by resurrection and the final return to his Father, giving us hope of full salvation, something very good came out of something that had seemed so bad. In time we may look back and see how this has become true in our own experience.

### Tracing the family likeness in others

The outstanding cheerfulness and unfailing helpfulness of a supermarket worker made me think that he was serving God as well as the customers and in conversation he readily admitted that we shared the same faith. As he said, it was likely that we would recognise the family likeness in each other, being brother and sister! There are more members of the family around than we often imagine. We should look for clues and then encourage each other to keep our spiritual mirrors polished so that each of us will reflect a better image of our loving Lord.<sup>25</sup> As we slowly grow to be more like him he is likely to show something of himself through us.

Dr Paul Brand was a distinguished surgeon, internationally famed for the advances he brought to the care of lepers by reconstructive surgery to their deformed hands and feet. His skills had been developed when working in London dealing with injuries sustained during the dreadful bombing raids of World War 2. A time of great danger and destruction had been overcome to produce a new and far reaching development.

Years later, during a teaching ward round at the Christian Medical College of Vellore, South India, Dr Brand watched his junior examining a patient. As he did so the young doctor showed great competence and kindness but 'the boss' looked puzzled. He said, 'The way that you are doing that reminds me so much of my old teacher in London. Your whole approach is just like his, but you have never met him.'

To his surprise the watching students looked at each other and started to laugh.

'What's the joke?' asked Paul Brand.

'Why, sir,' they replied, 'He is looking just like you.'

As a Christian junior doctor in London, Paul Brand had unconsciously absorbed some of the mannerisms of his old tutor and was now

handing them on to his own students in India. Some of those students would realise that not only was he handing on the likeness of his old teacher but their teacher was also giving them a glimpse of someone even greater. In his care for their outcast patients was something of the loving likeness of his indwelling Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Learning to look for good coming out of what had seemed so bad

Although Jesus knew the purpose of his coming to earth, and that it would mean extreme suffering before he achieved it he still went ahead, knowing that his Father would finally fulfil their shared will. As we grow up in our relationship with him we, too, learn to look beyond any present hardship and trust God to work for good through it. Looking again at Paul Brand's surgical skills, they had developed out of the horrors of war at a time he had also needed to trust God with his very life – and how greatly used that eventually became.

I once attended a meeting of a small group of junior hospital doctors, mostly from overseas, including our host and hostess. They were both members of staff at the local hospital and there was a hush in the room as they told of a crisis that had hit their busy lives about a couple of weeks before. They were just about to settle down for the night when our hostess, already half asleep, suddenly had two convulsions out of the blue, the second being very severe.

Most unusually our host's brother was staying overnight and, as a general practitioner, was an immediate source of strength and help. Although brought up as an atheist he told me later, 'It was God who arranged for me to be there that night.' Those at the heart of the episode quietly told us that this was also their assurance, helping them to trust that despite the troublesome implications of a diagnosis of epilepsy, their Lord had been with them and they could trust him with the outcome. They were already seeing how this had acted as a wake-up call not only for the visiting brother. Together they had been made to take stock of their married and professional lives, realising that excessive commitment to their jobs had taken the time needed to sustain and strengthen bonds with each other. This is a risk for so many hardworking couples.

When difficulties or outright suffering come our way, we need to recall first that God's aim is to train us to become more like Jesus and then remember how the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ led to his resurrection and our salvation. In the same way we may later be able to see how much good God has brought from something that at the time seemed so very bad.

The next chapter will suggest ways in which Jesus' lifestyle could affect our own, remembering that we have the promise of his Spirit to help us and keep us hopeful.<sup>26</sup>

### For further thought

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- Do you know people who make you think that they are members of God's family? (It may be interesting to hear the experiences used by God to bring that about.)
- Had you realised that life's painful times can also be very productive?

### Further resources

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- Wilson DC. *Ten fingers for God*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996
- Brother Andrew with Verne Becker. *The calling: a challenge to walk the narrow road*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H Revell, 2002

### References

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|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. John 10:30            | 14. 2 Timothy 4:10-11   |
| 2. John 14:9             | 15. Acts 12:25-13:13    |
| 3. Genesis 1:27          | 16. Acts 4:36-37        |
| 4. Genesis 3:8-9         | 17. Acts 9:27           |
| 5. Romans 8:11-14        | 18. Acts 11:19-30       |
| 6. Colossians 3:10       | 19. Acts 15:36-40       |
| 7. Colossians 1:15-16    | 20. 1 Peter 5:6-9       |
| 8. 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 | 21. Jeremiah 18:1-6     |
| 9. Romans 12:2-3         | 22. Isaiah 43:1-2       |
| 10. 2 Corinthians 3:18   | 23. Ephesians 4:15-16   |
| 11. 1 Corinthians 15:49  | 24. Hebrews 5:7-10      |
| 12. 1 Peter 5:8-9        | 25. 1 Corinthians 13:12 |
| 13. Philemon 1:23-24     | 26. Romans 15:13        |

