

“The Making of a Solid Cistern”

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God had tried everything regarding the people of Israel at this point; he had tried mollicoddling, and he had tried caring for them and lifting them up, positive affirmation, none of it worked. Now there is this chastising time - and that didn't even work. He got to the point where there was nothing left but tough love. He threw up his hands and said, “Babylonians, have at them.” It was painful and with great suffering because they would not change. The people of Israel looked everywhere else but at God. They were impatient, and when they were impatient they were like a small child. “If God doesn't give me what I want, when I want it, then I'm going to go look somewhere else. I'm going to stop my relationship with God. I will look for something else, or maybe I will just do it myself,” just like a child pitching a tantrum.

That is how a lot of people respond to God when they don't get what they want, when they want it, and how they want it. God doesn't work that way. God works on God's time. The world does not revolve around you and me. God treats us, cares for us, along with a much-bigger picture; and we fit into that in unique ways. But it doesn't mean that God is going to meet our needs right now, every minute of every day just the way we want it. So we get frustrated and stop going to church; and we stop praying, and we stop thinking about God. We are going to do it our way, or we are going to find something else. It is just like a child pitching a tantrum. But God will get to us. God has our best interests at heart. But God is going to do it on God's time, in God's ways. We have to trust that God knows even when we are not sure in any given moment.

So we either have to change, or give up trying to be faithful - and God will continue to chase us just like a parent with a child who pitches a tantrum; pulls us up and let's us face it and get beyond it.

Our daughter, Hannah, had one tantrum in her life. We were in a mall. It was the most embarrassing thing. [I] can't believe [it] - she acted just like Jill. [Laughter.] Actually, I didn't know what to do. She had never thrown a tantrum. She was on the ground, and she was wailing. I looked at her like she had just been possessed by Satan, and Jill just turned around and walked away.

I didn't know what to do, but if I was going to have one of them mad at me, I didn't want it to be Jill, so I followed along and, all of a sudden, Hannah stopped wailing and looked around and wondered, “Where did mom and dad go?” And she got up and ran around, until she found us, and she never threw another tantrum.

God looks at us when we get upset and pitch a fit and we do this and that, like the people of Israel, and God looks at us like we looked at a 4-year-old Hannah having a tantrum, flailing around on the floor. And he says, “Are you done with your tantrum yet?” He says, “I'm ready to care for you, help you, assist you - but not while you are throwing your tantrum.”

That's how God treated the people of Israel. Then, when their tantrum was done he said, “Now, how are you going to change so that you don't do the same thing again?”

I thought about that, and thought, “God is patient with Scott.” It’s hard being Scott’s God, because I can find more ways to screw something up, even when I’m not even trying. And, sometimes, even though I’m a minister and I get paid to do this - sometimes the last thing I think of is prayer. I have been doing this for so long. I should get down on my knees, but so many times that is one thing I forget; and I think, “Oh, yeah, I forgot to pray.”

So I started thinking about how can I change to make it stick - because I do this over and over again - and I found an interesting article in one of my favorite periodicals, The Atlantic Monthly. So I went to Atlantic.com, because I had to find back issues to find this answer.

It was an article called “Can Personality Change?” by a University of Pennsylvania professor of psychology, Scott Barry Kaufman. He started talking about a 2014 study where it traced people’s goals for personality change: how you heal their broken cisterns. He found out that the vast majority of people who wanted to change their personality wanted to become more extraverted. They wanted to become more agreeable, more emotionally stable and to be more open to new experiences, without a negative attitude.

What he found was that 97 percent of those people wished they were more conscientious. So, as he interviewed them, talked to them and learned, he thought about how every single one of those people and probably all of us have turned to having a root of dissatisfaction that burns within us - that we are basically unhappy and unfilled, and that is how we view life. It takes a real change to be optimistic for most all of us.

The people of Israel were not the only ones who were cynical and pessimistic and walked out on God. It is almost in our DNA, and it takes a real work of will to be positive and hopeful.

He [Kaufman] continued to study it and went back to a study in 1968 by a very famous social psychologist, Walter Mischel, at Stanford University. It was the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment. I don’t know if you have ever heard of it, but it was a really interesting experiment. He took a group of children (I think they were in 3rd grade), sat them down and he said, “Now, I will give you this really good-tasting marshmallow. I will give you one now, or I will give you two in 15 minutes.” So half [of the children] in that group took that marshmallow, ate it and were done. The other half of the group waited and watched the others eat their one marshmallow - which would not have been easy for 3rd graders, or 53-year-olds - and they waited their 15 minutes and got their two marshmallows.

Now that sounds like a simple experiment, except Dr. Mischel followed this group of children until they graduated from high school, and what he found was, almost to a child, that the children who took the one marshmallow - that lived in the moment and had to have instant gratification - were less successful in life than those who could wait a little while - even 15 minutes - and could delay gratification and get more. They were successful in life through high school.

It was only a marshmallow, and yet, these children were able to realize that you could get something more if you delayed gratification. They understood it, not just for marshmallows, but with their homework. They understood it with other decisions that they had to make. It

made them less selfish and less self-centered, and it helped them to understand if you do things well to become healthy and whole, you have to be patient. You have to delay things in order to get better things. You have to set goals - not just two marshmallows - but they [those who waited] set other goals to get things better than marshmallows. Delayed gratification made all the difference in the health and well-being of people. When you have to have it all now, and now instantly, you have the broken cistern. That's the struggle. That's what they learned.

In another study in 1979, Seymour Epstein conducted a series of studies in which he observed peoples' behaviors on several occasions, from impulsivity to happiness, to nurturing, to problem solving. What he found was that most people don't have one core set of beliefs. They are motivated by situations. Very few people had a set of core values that were strong enough to be consistent. Epstein contended that this creates an unhealthy environment. Not all change is good. You have to have a core belief system in order to be whole spiritually, emotionally and physically. As he worked with that group, and allowed them to have that core of ability, it broke a barrier. It broke a barrier - sometimes 30 to 90 percent improvement on their life skills, when they started evaluating the decisions that they make. A lot of people just running around and reacting; never sitting down and asking, "Why do I feel this way? What do I want to do? Who do I want to be?" Those simple questions can change the way you live, and who you are.

The most amazing thing that Epstein found was that genetic backgrounds did not make that big a difference. It doesn't matter how you were made, who your parents were, or even what your social economic status was - if you just take time to think before you react. People tend to become more mature and well-adjusted as they age. The typical 65-year-old is more self-disciplined than about 85 percent of early adolescents, and more agreeable than about 75 percent of them. Not a surprise. So we do get better over time. We work at it. Broken cisterns do not have to be broken forever.

More recently that same study in 2006 [Epstein] found college students, and pulled them aside to try and find out how their personalities could be restored. They wanted the same things as the children and the adults - to become more extraverted and conscientious - but they were all messed up with how they got there. In the study, they found out that those college students who exhibited themselves boring were 75-85 percent more likely to binge drink. That's college thinking for you: "I want to be more interesting, so I'm going to become drunk. That will make me more interesting."

Another study in 2011 found that students who become concerned about how to have more desirable characteristics started getting into extra extracurricular activities, because then they would learn how to be more interesting - to become better leaders. Goal setting became the major issue.

More recently, Nathan Hudson of Michigan State University and Chris Fraley of University of Illinois looked at a sample of undergraduates and declared they were going to help them with their goals and personality improvement over a 16-week semester. They took the entire group, gave them personality studies, and then retested them throughout the semester to find out what worked. Half the group they let study anything. The other half were taught them how to set goals. That group - the goal setters - shined. They did much better in class work and were more socially conscious, and more related with their friends. The others

didn't improve whatsoever. Having goals, according to Hudson and Fraley, is what differentiates us from others. The changes happened slowly over the course of the semester.

We are all very similar in how we attack life with joy and understanding that either keep us in cracked cisterns, or allow us to grow. We need to trust haphazardly – go down different roads.

One of the goals we need to address is “where is my faith?” Are we prepared, or will our cisterns remain broken until the Holy Spirit heals them, and restores them? The water will continue to seep away - that baptismal water - out of our soul and we will have nothing left to fight with. Or, we can allow God, in God's time, with patience, to restore our hearts?

Go home today. Find a half-hour. Write down who you want to be. It won't happen in an instant, but you have the goals to work toward it. You can be the person you desire to be, the person God intended you to be. Go about that hard work. Watch the joy, the hope, and the positive, agreeable personality come out in you, because it will be blessed by God.
Amen