

## THE OPPORTUNITIES OF REALIGNMENT

Romans 6:11-13; Acts 10:9-16; John 8:3-11 (NASB)

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The prologue to the epic film, *The Lord of the Rings*, begins with these words:

“The world is changed.  
I can feel it in the water.  
I can feel it in the earth.  
I can smell it in the air.  
Much that once was is now lost...”

Those are the words of Galadriel, queen of the elves, and one of the most powerful beings in J. R. R. Tolkien’s imaginary land, Middle Earth. It is her way of saying that she is perceiving the undoing of the world as she knew it. If we were alive during such a time, how would we perceive it from our small, personal perspective? Tolkien wrote of how the dissolution of the world looked to short, happy creatures called Hobbits:

“There were rumours of strange things happening in the world outside....Elves, who seldom walked in the Shire, could now be seen passing westward through the woods in the evening, passing and not returning....There were dwarves on the road in unusual numbers....Frodo often met strange dwarves of far countries, seeking refuge in the West. They were troubled, and some spoke in whispers of the Enemy and of the Land of Mordor....It seemed that the evil power in Mirkwood had been driven out...only to reappear in greater strength in the old strongholds of Mordor. The Dark Tower had been rebuilt, it was said. From there the power was spreading far and wide, and away far east and south there were wars and growing fear. Orcs were multiplying again in the mountains. Trolls were abroad, no longer dull-witted, but cunning and armed with dreadful weapons. And there were murmured hints of creatures more terrible than all these, but they had no name.” (*The Lord of the Rings*, Collectors’ Edition, J. R. R. Tolkien, pp. 52-53, *passim*).

In fact, the inhabitants of Middle Earth were living through the end of the Third Age, the age of the rule of men as opposed to other creatures. It had been glorious, but now was a broken shell of its former self. No human king was left at all. The old capital city of Osgiliath was abandoned. A mere steward, not a king, managed what was left from the fortified city of Minas Tirith, and evil was on the rise.

This is a good picture of what is happening to Western civilization as we speak. In his mammoth work, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*, historian and cultural critic Jacques Barzun argues that the West has had various powerful energies at play over the past five centuries which are now mostly spent. He makes a harsh judgment: “The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. Boredom and fatigue are [the] great historical forces [of our time].”

It seems clear that we are living in such times. “Much that once was is now lost,” as Galadriel spoke. The world is coming unglued. But that is not the end of the story. When things come unglued they become available for realignment: people, institutions, allegiances, affections—everything, actually. And in realignment there are opportunities.

## REALIGNMENT IS THE MISSION

But before we explore the opportunities we must affirm that realignment to God is our mission and the point of everything that we do. Paul wrote to the Romans: **“Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God”** (Romans 6:11-13).

The fall of mankind into sin caused a total misalignment between every human being ever born and the God who made us. We want what God does not want for us and we do not want what God wants for us. Paul’s words to the Romans paint the path out of that condition for believers and those who do not yet believe. God wants to take every one of us to a condition where we completely disconnect from the desires and behaviors of sin. It is proper to say that his desire is that we be dead to sin. And he wants us to so completely connect with him and his righteousness that we are said to be alive to him and only him. This is the Great Realignment of the Ages. This is what God is doing in every dispensation of time.

A. W. Tozer famously said that it is no honor for a Christian to be called “well-adjusted” because it almost always means adjusted to a world system which is irreparably broken. And the moment that anyone becomes “well-adjusted” to God he or she becomes misaligned with the world.

Nothing else we do matters apart from this Great Realignment of persons.

## THE OPPORTUNITIES OF REALIGNMENT ARE PROVIDENTIAL

It is easy to live in a permanent condition of anxiety and dismay as we watch the world come unglued. No human solution is on the horizon. That is the definition of post-modernity. We have given up many things which have defined our culture, and we do not know what will define our culture in the future. But that is an utterly inadequate view for a Christian to have. We have a God who oversees all history and is working his plan of redemption. I would argue that God himself is behind the shaking up of the West. In so doing he is deliberately creating opportunities for his kingdom to grow. Falling apart may be the best thing that has happened to us in centuries!

A review of some inflexion points in redemptive history will unveil this kind of working of providence. Even as God launched the nation of Israel through Abraham he revealed his purpose to bless and redeem all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike: **“And I will make you a great nation, /And I will bless you, /And make your name great; /And so you shall be a blessing; /And I will bless those who bless you, /And the one who curses you I will curse. /And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed”** (Genesis 12:2-3).

But countless generations and many centuries passed with no apparent progress on what we often call the bottom line of the Abrahamic Covenant. That would wait until the coming of Messiah Jesus. A godly old man named Simeon said the following when he discovered that Mary and Joseph had brought their baby to the temple to be blessed according to the Jewish custom: **“For my eyes have seen Your salvation, /Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, /A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, /And the glory of Your people Israel”** (Luke 2:30-32, caps in orig.).

As the church was born on the Day of Pentecost it was overwhelmingly Jewish, with elements of race, culture, and religion locked together. As a result, the purpose of God to reach people of all races was not moving forward. We could say that the early church was misaligned with God’s ultimate purpose to populate heaven with people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

So God acted providentially in several ways to realign his church. He began by appearing to the Apostle Peter in a confrontational vision: **“On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. A voice came to him, ‘Get up, Peter, kill and eat!’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.’ Again a voice came to him a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’ This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky”** (Acts 10:9-16).

That was God bringing an internal confrontation to a key thought leader who would powerfully influence others. God also brought several external forces to push the realignment of his church. The early church was born in Jerusalem of primarily Jewish people but could not stay that way in order to fulfill God’s promise. So the Lord permitted both intense persecution and also a terrible famine to drive believers out of Jerusalem.

Between the doctrinal realignment which came through Peter and Paul, and the geographical realignment which came from the dispersion from Jerusalem, God assembled the primary engine of growth for the early church as documented by Michael Green in his book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*. He writes: “First, they did most of their evangelism on what we would call secular ground. You would find them in the laundries, at the street corners, and in the wine bars talking about Jesus to all who would listen....A second priority of the early Christians seems to have been personal conversations with individuals...no hype, no manipulation, no soapbox oratory” (Eerdmans, 1970, pp. 23-24 *passim*). It has often been said that the early church “gossiped the gospel.” None of that could have happened if the church remained stuck in Jerusalem as a “sect of the Jews.”

This is good news and bad news. First, the bad: God is the one making the world come unglued. Then the good: He is providing his church with untold opportunities to share the gospel.

For example, people are now fleeing their countries, migrating, and otherwise moving all over the planet in an unprecedented way. It is well-known that when people move to a new country they are

much more likely to trust Christ than while still living in their home cultures. This seems to last for only a few years and then they become locked up again.

But because of post-modernity and its cultural destruction this is now happening to everyone in the West. We have lost our God, our religion, our families, our logic, our loves, our history, our traditions, our moral framework, and many have lost their souls. We are living in a megashift and we cannot choose otherwise. But that painful shift is opening doors to ministry which have not been seen in generations.

## THE CHURCH NEEDS TO REALIGN TO GRASP THE OPPORTUNITIES

The typical church ministry, not very long ago, was attuned to a society with a cultural awareness and approval of Christianity. This is no longer true.

New York State culture is leading the country in aspects of Western culture which are coming unglued, but it is also characteristic of things happening across the country. Gambling seems to be everywhere. Elective abortion for any reason is enshrined in law. Alcohol, heroin, and prescription drug use is through the roof. The Governor is rumored to be considering legalizing marijuana for recreational use.

The upstate economy is in recession. People are tied up in the bondage of personal debt even as the state debt soars. There are many idolatries afoot. Marriage and family are breaking down, stealing personal strength from a new generation. Political and ideological conflict is a way of life.

In the face of these monsters the church has fired the tried and true bullets which now work no better than pea shooters. There are lots of exceptions to the following list, and I admit that I am painting with a broad brush. But the program-based design which has such long roots is still bedeviling our church leaders. We are mostly still following a plan of Old Testament-style exclusive leadership by male elders which boxes women and other leaders out of the core leadership of the church. Our tendency to retreat from culture has been matched by a mighty shove in the back from the world system. And we have a pattern of low-involvement in the community. Rightly or wrongly, the primary view of the church by our communities is that it is not really good for anything.

In contrast to this we need to release our grasp on many familiar things and let our God-given leaders lead. We need to be rescuing people from addictions. We need to affirm male elders strongly while including non-elder leaders in a cooperative model. We need to be bringing reconciliation to broken relationships and helping people climb out of debt. And we desperately need to engage the real needs of our communities and bring a blessing which cannot be ignored.

Towering above all these things are the central realities of the faith which are revealed in an unlikely encounter from Jesus' earthly ministry: **“The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, ‘Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?’ They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, ‘He who is without**

**sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. Straightening up, Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?’ She said, ‘No one, Lord.’ And Jesus said, ‘I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more’” (John 8:3-11).**

Some dispute the authenticity of this account because it is absent in many early New Testament manuscripts. I have come to conclude that it may have been excluded through being misunderstood. But properly understood I believe it reveals the way Jesus deals with the kind of broken people we see everywhere today.

We see Jesus here overflowing with grace and truth, mediated by love. He was confronted by spiritually compromised religious people eager to make accusations and do harm. They cared nothing for the accused woman. They would have been happy for her to die if it allowed them to score points against Jesus. They were also hypocrites because they did not bring the guilty man for the same application of justice.

Jesus brought truth to them when he invited the one without sin to cast the first stone. This is not a random statement but a reference to a law which every Jewish person would know. If someone were to bring a malicious charge against another for personal reasons, the Law prescribed that the accuser was to experience the judgment he wished to fall on the other, as seen in Deuteronomy 19:16-19. By raising the issue of the accusers’ sin Jesus brought a powerful confrontation. They wanted death for the woman, so death was prescribed by the law—at least potentially--as their fate.

In spite of the accusers’ bad motives Jesus extended grace to them by writing in the dirt and giving them the opportunity to change their minds—to at least begin to repent. They all took their opportunity by slinking away. Thus, he upheld the law but also granted grace and an opportunity to change. He did this out of love. Perhaps this powerful encounter might trigger the godly sorrow which leads to repentance and possible faith in Messiah. Eternity was on the line.

And I think we often think that Jesus merely let the accused woman off. In fact, there were no valid accusers left, so Jesus concluded: **“I do not condemn you, either.”** He did not break the law, he confirmed it. He reprimanded her and gave her the opportunity to repent and sin no more. That is also an act of grace done out of love.

No one had to die that day, and they all got to leave with the truth of God confirmed in their lives and with a personal experience of the grace and truth of Christ—everyone.

Unvarnished truth, grace, and love are the very things we need to bring to a society which is coming unglued, where so many are losing their way and becoming lost. Christians are not exempted. All around we see denominations, local churches, and individual Christians losing their way.

These upheavals of our time are providing opportunities for realignment. In the last four years seven churches have approached me as Superintendent to consider affiliating with the Alliance. If we show up as healthy Christians in healthy churches which are full of grace, truth, and love we will become a super magnet for those who are rolling around feeling disconnected.

But let us not imagine that showing up for these opportunities will be comfortable. In my first senior pastorate I heard a perpetual conversation which went like this: “We should be doing things the way we did them in Pennsylvania or Ohio where I grew up in my home church.” I listened to years of this. Finally, I had a stroke of insight. I asked: “Are THEY still doing church that way?”

The answer was no. They said: “When we go back to visit everything has changed!”

I do not judge them for wanting a tranquil familiarity, but the mission of the church supersedes everything else. The old habits no longer serve, the beaten trails are overgrown, and the once-useful patterns are blown to smithereens.

Welcome to the un-comfort zone. Everything is coming unglued. This is the environment in which our new workers will work, and they will not know anything else. But when things come unglued they also become available for realignment. Above all other forces it is God who shakes the world.

To conclude: First, make sure you are whole-heartedly living in your personal realignment with Jesus in the kingdom of God. Check your inner self. Assess your sanctification. Measure your current filling of the Holy Spirit without whom we can accomplish nothing.

Secondly, ask God for piercing insight into what is happening in our world and how these changes can be opportunities. Seek the Lord for what he wants you to do.

People are lost in gambling, sexual addiction, substance abuse, and self-centeredness. Go get them. Divorced people and single parents are everywhere. Make a place for them. People with same-sex attractions are everywhere. Give them a path to find the deeper satisfaction of relationship with God. Millions of men and women who have aborted their babies are walking around with a perpetual sense of guilt. Show them how guilt can be done away in Jesus. Kids and teens with no sense of purpose are making a mess of their lives. Teach them that they were created to follow Jesus. And we are living in the greatest displacement of ethnic peoples the world has ever seen. Invite them, regardless of why they have migrated, to find their true home in Jesus.

None of my exhortations will have any impact unless we face a crucial question. I invite you to face what Dennis Agajanian asked in a song: “Who will step out from the crowd and be strong enough to lead?” Will you and I embrace the discomfort of ministry in our time? Because we don’t get to live in any other time.

“The world is changed....Much which once was is now lost.”

I invite you to consecrate yourself afresh, and then act boldly for the kingdom of Jesus Christ.