

THE LAST WORD

Robbie F. Castleman

In the liturgy of our congregation's service of worship, we have a time for a 'silent confession of sin' followed by a generalised corporate confession led by the pastor. This is followed by a declaration of forgiveness from a passage in the New Testament. The response to this exercise of confession is a time of sung and spoken praise to the Lord for his forgiveness. My son, Scott, pointed out one day that the part he always had trouble with was how short the personal confession time was. He was just getting started and then was swept away into forgiveness. He always wanted more time to really 'get everything out!' I was preparing to commiserate with him, agree and talk about sin and confession when he said, 'But I've begun to realise that's how confession is supposed to be in the Scripture. That's how God cuts short our confession. Just as the prodigal son gets started, the father cuts him short. He knows it all and it's enough that repentance had brought him home!'

What an outrageous idea! God interrupting our heartfelt confession, our evidence of repentance with his own Good News! The wayward child of the Father wanting to work through his whole prepared and earnest speech, being interrupted and invited to a party in his honour! Preparing to be a hired hand, and ushered to the head table instead! Ready to be a servant and reinstated as a son! Yes, this is a picture of God's grace, the Good News that is always bigger than the bad news I confess.

As I reflected on this insight of my son, I remembered the biggest lesson about confession and the recognition of sin that I ever learned. This lesson was a parallel to Scott's and it came at a time when I became aware of a long-buried sin that I had only become aware of when I was forty-something years old! I was certainly heartbroken to see it's long-term influence on my life, and really struggled with the idea of 'how bad I must be if it took God this long to show me this sinful attitude!' I was in a self-recriminating mode of spiritual flagellation when I read these verses in the middle of Exodus 23:29, 30.

I shall ... drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. I will not drive them out in a single year, or the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased enough to possess the land.

In an instant of insight that didn't seem like a revelation of flesh-and-blood, but the Father's voice, I realised two things. First, God takes his time in showing us sin that is embedded deeply in our fractured character. He does this because *if any of us saw all of our*

sin all at once we would indeed be desolate. We can't really handle the awful truth about our sinfulness all at once and survive. Indeed, this is what it means to die to ourselves, to be crucified with Christ and yet live. And in the particulars built on this theological confidence, God is patient to show us what he sees.

Secondly, I realised that I hadn't come to this point in my Christian life because I was an awful and self-deceived back-slider, a fraud to the core, a fake at the Christian life. (This gives you some insight into my state of mind and heart as I beat myself up over the recognition of this latently discovered sin!) No, this was God's time for me to see this sin, repent of this sin and confess this sin *because* I was growing as a Christian, as an earnest disciple. I had 'increased enough to possess' the promise on the other side! This time became a time of encouragement and progress in my sojourn of faith, not a marker of failure and disobedience. It was all a part of God keeping his promise to bring me 'to completion in the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1:6).

I remember that day like it was yesterday and in the reflection of my son in his own time of confession-cut-short-by-grace, I could hear the Father's voice again. I could smell the fatted calf, see the table set, and know once more for sure what it was to be declared 'alive' again, robed in borrowed righteousness, bejewelled by God's goodness.

Those of us who study and teach the faith are sometimes very aware of hypocrisy and unrighteousness in our lives. We often allow ourselves far less grace and forgiveness at a time of repentance and confession than we extend to others. I hope this *Last Word* reminds you of God's delight in interrupting our prepared speeches of contrition and acts of breast-beating. Whether we are Martin Luther sleeping on a cold floor, the prodigal son rehearsing on the road home, or my son frustrated with having the confession time always seem too short, God breaks into our life's liturgy with joy and the Kingdom's party begins again!