

Warts And All: People Of God Who Were Human Too

by Ray C. Stedman

The place was England, during the years of the Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell. The Protector himself addressed the famous French painter, Mr. Peter Lely, saying: "I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and all; otherwise I never will pay a farthing for it."

Cromwell's blunt words have since served as a forceful way to express a desire for honest description. "Warts and all---that's the way I want it!" There is a hunger in us all for realism, until, of course, we see the picture which was drawn or painted of us, and then we think it doesn't do us justice!

And that, too, reflects a common attitude. Biographers (especially biographers of Christian heroes or heroines) often show a pronounced tendency to present their subjects in brighter-than-life colors. As a young Christian I read stories of martyrs and missionaries that left me feeling hopelessly inadequate of ever measuring up to such shining examples. At the time I didn't realize it was all done with literary mirrors that reflected the factual highlights of a career, but left out most of the dark valleys of failure or despair that ought to have been part of the picture.

Fortunately, the Bible doesn't do that. Since it is God's Book it reflects one of the great attributes of God---he is a total Realist! He sees people and things the way they actually are, "warts and all." He does not kid himself or anyone else, but assesses everything with stark realism, for he is the Author of all. And even more, he uses people who are not perfect---in fact, he seems to prefer that kind! Paul reminds the Corinthians that there were few among them of noble or high social standing, but God deliberately chose to use many whom the world regarded as foolish or weak in order to show (as he says in another place) that the power "is from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

That remarkably used Bible teacher of World War 1, Oswald Chambers, states the truth well. He says, "God can achieve his purpose either through the absence of human power and resources, or the abandonment of reliance on them. All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because their unusual dependence on him made possible the unique display of his power and grace. He chose and used somebodies only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources."

Think of the marred men and women whom the Bible holds up as models for our emulation. At the dawn of time there was Enoch, who was said to walk with God for 300 of his 365 years, and then "was not, for God took him," not in death, as the N.T. makes clear, but alive into heaven. Yet for 65 years he did not walk with God! It seems clear that for those years he lived like most of us, going along with the self-serving, thoughtless lifestyle that was all around. But God could and did change him and use him till he left an impress upon the entire generation before the Flood.

Then, after the flood, Noah messed up his witness by getting drunk and becoming indecently exposed before one of his sons. Was he stamped "Reject" by God for this? No, instead he became an example of God's forgiving grace, and was trusted with a revelation from God that defined the limits of human government and has ruled the natural world ever since. There was Rahab, a street woman of Jericho, who for faith's sake forsook her ancient profession, married a godly Israelite, and became an ancestress of Jesus.

Even Moses lost his temper and murdered an Egyptian, but was chosen by God to lead his people out of Egypt

and into a new relationship with him that has powerfully affected the world to this day. Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, has often been held up as one who had no sins on his record. But the Bible traces in all honesty his self-righteous spirit before his brothers, and his youthful pride which required tempering in prison before he was ready for his great role as the second ruler of Egypt.

Our next six studies will turn a spotlight on others in the Bible who struggled with habits of lying, tendencies to manipulate others, lustful urges, passionate liaisons that destroyed faith, stubborn unbelief, and sulking self-centeredness---and yet whom God picked up and used "warts and all!" The centuries since have provided numerous examples of the same phenomenon, for it is clearly a divine methodology. Despite a widespread conviction to the contrary it can be stoutly asserted that *no physical or social handicap, no dysfunctional family background, or personal record of past failure, can prevent anyone from becoming a useful instrument of God's working, if he or she will accept God's cleansing, learn God's methods from his Word, and move into the opportunities which God's Spirit will open!*

The primary essential in achieving this usefulness is to become aware of the resources God provides which non-Christians know nothing about. For instance, Christians are given the Holy Spirit to live in them continually. He is not a spirit of fear, we are told, but rather a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline (2 Tim. 1:7). Acting on that assumption means the Christian will refuse to be afraid since God is with him or her, will take for granted the ability to obey God or to love others, and will set the mind resolutely to keep moving on that pathway. An example of this comes from the life of Fanny Crosby. She was blinded while still an infant and lived into her nineties totally blind. Yet she was greatly used in the nineteenth century to write many of the hymns we sing today. When she was only eight years old she put her philosophy into verse, writing:

Oh, what a happy child I am
Although I cannot see.
I am resolved that in this world,
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't,
To weep and sigh because I'm blind
I cannot and I won't!

Such remarkable resolve discloses a character taught by the Spirit to renounce fear, rely on God's strength, and reach out in love to those in need around.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this truth is that God often uses the very handicap or failure we thought unfitted us, to be the open door he employs to make us a blessing. Many years ago I was privileged to travel with Dr. H.A. Ironside, famous pastor for years of the great Moody Church of Chicago. Once, in Lynchburg, Virginia, we met an elderly Episcopalian rector who told us the fascinating story of his conversion. He was a student at Cambridge University when D. L. Moody was invited to speak at the University during his first evangelistic crusade in England.

Many of the students were angry and upset by this invitation to one they regarded as a backwoods American preacher who butchered the English language. To have him speak at what they regarded as the center of culture in the world was to them outrageous. Moody had no more than a fifth grade education and was noted for his ungrammatical lapses. It is said he was the only man of his generation who could pronounce Jerusalem in one syllable! This young man, with several others, determined to sit in the front row and upset the meeting by making cat calls and creating as much disturbance as possible.

Before Moody spoke he asked his musical associate, Ira D. Sankey, to sing. Sankey's song quieted the meeting and when he finished Mr. Moody, without introduction, stepped to the front of the platform, pointed his finger at the young men on the front row and said directly to them, "Young gentlemen, don't ever think that God don't love you, for he do!" The earnest passion with which he spoke and his ungrammatical beginning caught the young men by surprise and they listened to his entire talk in silence. Recalling the event the old rector said, "When Moody gave an invitation at the end of his message I was the first one in the inquiry room.

I became a Christian then and have followed the footsteps of D. L. Moody ever since."

Such a story is not meant to suggest that great fame will result for every one whom God uses "warts and all." Probably the greatest of God's saints are unknown to the world at large. But it is not necessary to be famous to be greatly used by God. It is in the kitchen, the office, the backyard, the supermarket that God chooses to use most of us. Someone has captured that truth well in this verse by an unknown writer:

'Tis in the daily toil and stress we best can preach
his loveliness,
It's Mrs. Johnston's shining face proclaims that she
is saved by grace,
While Mrs. Smith by kindly deeds shows how from sin
her soul is freed,
And in the busy common round reveals the Saviour
she has found.
And Ann by polishing the floors, tells forth the
Master she adores.
"Oh, Lord," I pray on bended knee, "make me like these,
your children, please."

This is the level at which the true impact of the Church is made. Again, contrary to widespread conviction, it is not the great meetings which change the world, it is not the Councils of the Church which really alter history. It is the accumulated impact of thousands of people who once were angry, cynical rebels against society; or were bound by drug abuse, alcoholism or sexual perversion; or were proud, snooty intellectuals, who are now changed by grace, are becoming loving, caring individuals, living in sexual purity, and reaching out to others without thought of self. These are today's heroes of faith who are winning God's battles in an evil world.

Oh, yes, another thing. Age doesn't make any difference. The Bible list of God's servants range from teenagers to octogenarians, and some didn't even start till they were in their eighties. But all discovered the truth that God wanted them to think of themselves as available bodies, allowing him to transform their thinking by exposure to his word, and thus to discover there is no more exciting lifestyle than to be an instrument of God at work.

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