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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## Faith and Flat-Pack Furniture

By Ron Allen

There was a time when home furniture was made by people who knew how to work with wood. They were artisans who understood the niceties of mortise-and-tenon, tongue-and-groove, dovetail joints, bridle joints, and rebates. One bought a chest of drawers or a table and knew it would be the work of a craftsman.



It's nothing like that now. You want furniture; you go to a huge store where you will be sold a table or a wardrobe in a 'flat-pack,' so called. You have to take it home

and put it together yourself. You want a new kitchen? Get a flat-pack. Our neighbor bought one. He spent weeks trying to assemble it. We could hear him over there, hard at it. There was lots of loud argument between him and his wife, lots of swearing and the sound of things being broken.

I happen know what the neighbor was going through, so I heard it all sympathetically. I bought a flat-pack bookcase: a box of bits and pieces with the barest of instructions. The thing about flat-packs is that it's up to you to assemble it. You have to get it right. Once you have opened up the box and made a start, you can't take it back. You assemble it. It doesn't look right, but there it stands, in your



house, a monument to your ineptitude, a permanent reminder of your failure to correctly follow the instructions.

Some people think faith is like following a set of instructions, an undertaking that has to be done right.

Josephine is shocked, confused, and discouraged. Half a lifetime ago, she confessed faith in the Lord. She was baptized. She began to pray regularly and attend church. She paid tithes and volunteered at the drop-in center for the homeless. She believed in heaven and hell, and only voted for Christian candidates. Now see what has happened! Her teen son has been caught using drugs; her husband has been laid off, and her sister has cancer. She thinks she must have misread the instructions; her faith must have been faulty. She is worried and frightened. She should have been more vigilant.

After forty years in the desert, the Israelites were about to cross over Jordan into the Promised Land. Moses gathered them together to hear his instructions. He set before them a choice between life and death: life, if they were careful to do all that he had taught them; and death, if they failed to obey the teaching. He came to the end of his long list of warnings and encouragements, and said this:

*"Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?' Nor is it beyond the sea so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it?' No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in heart so that you may obey it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).*

In Romans 10, Paul takes the words of Moses on that occasion and uses them to teach something about faith.

*"But the righteousness that is by faith says, 'Do not say in your heart who will ascend into heaven? (That is, to bring Christ down), or 'Who will descend into the deep?' (That is, to bring Christ up from the dead), but what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming'" (Romans 10:6-8).*

The great blessing that God bestows on human beings is the

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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God, we commend ourselves in every way: in endurance, in troubles, in hardships...” (2 Corinthians 6:4).*

Paul was very protective of his reputation as a minister of Christ. So much so, that he was regularly prepared to forgo his due freedoms and rights in order to forestall criticism, and to advance the gospel.

In this passage, he lists some of the ways he sought to commend the gospel through his patient endurance of events and circumstances that were his lot. While he applied his language to his own experience, it nevertheless applies to Christ’s servants in all ages.

The word ‘hardships’ (quoted above) is ‘necessities’ in the KJV. It is a Greek word speaking of unavoidable obligations or duties. The same word occurs in 1 Corinthians 9:16, where Paul says: *“Necessity is laid upon me; woe is me if I preach not the gospel.”*

In the context of our verse, Paul recounts a catalog of experiences that might easily make the bravest falter. Yet, upon reflection, they are not tests and privations that only Christians have. They are the stuff of humanity’s common lot. Though the Christian is often up against the wisdom and wit of the world, he nevertheless shares troubles, misunderstandings, accidents, and weariness with the rest of mankind.

Paul’s ‘necessities’ are really life’s inevitabilities. In order to live well, each must come to terms with reality. There is a



Christian way of doing this, to the degree that men and women of faith are able to meet obligation and difficulty with courage and hope. To that degree, they commend the gospel of their profession.


One of life’s inevitabilities is pain. There are those who, without faith, are able to grit their teeth and graft their way through, but the Christian has an added dimension. His trial is no less grievous but he feels himself to be held in the hands of a loving father. He carries his limitation with grace, and even humor. His happy secret is a quiet patience and trust in God. He knows good will come of it all.

Another inevitability is temptation. It attaches not only to folk who have to contend with too little food, or too much disaster. One of the hardest temptations comes often in the form of ease or prosperity. Many a life is ruined by excess. There is no exemption for the Christian, but she has the promise that she will not face temptation without Spiritual energy to help her resist. So James says: *“Count it all joy when you fall in to diverse temptation...”* The believer may be a warrior under siege, but her trial is never a lonely one. God is with her. She will never be forsaken.

The last reality, which needs to be accepted, is death. It is said, that Christians in the first century, triumphed over their pagan neighbors in three ways: They out-lived them, out-thought them, and out-died them.

In the Roman world, people were caught up in a mad lust for pleasure. A similar crazed appetite for diversion and gratification is apparent today. Could it be that a view of death that is uninformed by trust in a loving God, now drives this frantic pursuit of amusement? For modern pagans, death is but the triumph of nothingness.

For Christians, death is certain, but it is not a doorway into a black hole. It is a portal of hope and joy. When Browning died, Edward Burne Jones attended his funeral. Later, Jones remarked that the service was altogether too gloomy for him. *“I would have much preferred a banner or two,”* he wrote. *“...and much would I have given if a chorister had come out and rent the air with a trumpet.”*

Indeed! When a believer dies, banners and trumpets are entirely appropriate. The Christian departs not into oblivion, but *“to be with Christ, which is far better.”* 

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blessing of his righteousness. All other gifts and benefits are encompassed in this windfall. To be “right with God”, forever in his good books, forever his child, forever loved, and treasured by the Creator—that is the bonanza of the gospel.

It is not remote. It is not out of reach. You don’t have to rack your brains, marshal every nerve and muscle so you can climb your way up to it. You don’t have to draw deep breaths so you can dive deep to procure it. It is near. Christ has come from heaven and made God accessible. Christ has returned from the abyss of death and lives evermore. There is nothing you can do to induce God to make you his beloved, nothing you can do to inveigle him into liking you, accepting you, or loving you. No resourcefulness of yours could possibly appropriate the eternal world. Christ has made it yours already and Paul calls it the righteousness that is by faith.

For this reason, faith is something other than making certain to follow the instructions. It is more a concurring, acquiescing role. If we are doing all the right things in order to keep God interested in us, it is not the righteousness of faith. Faith is a grateful poise in view of God’s interminable good will, a confident repose in God who has already come to us, and who is very near.

Thirty-five years ago, my wife and I left sunburned Australia to take up pastoral work in Idaho. We touched down in mid-winter, the Boise valley was blanketed in snow. Our bodies were shocked by the air temperature. We were glad when we found a house equipped with a wood stove heater in the living room, but where do we get the wood to burn in it?

Carmen saw a notice in the newspaper advertising builders’ off-cuts by the truckload at a good price. The price seemed unreasonably cheap, we assumed that ‘truck’ meant a pick-up truck. Imagine our surprise when a five-ton tip-truck backed into our driveway and dumped its load. Access to our back yard was completely blocked by this mountain of wood. Years later, when we moved from there, we were still burning our way through that woodpile.

The arrival of a truckload of winter fuel made redundant the question of how we would keep warm. Surviving three months

of the year at twenty degrees below was not now an issue, not a concern, but a circumstance of gratitude.

When I was a youth, I was able to eat a lot. I still love to eat, but the older I become the less I can ingest. On occasions when I would get to eat at a buffet restaurant where there were acres of food, I used to get a mildly euphoric feeling of being transported into a paradise of abundance. It was as if all my gastronomic dreams had rendezvoused with a glorious supply.

It was the same with our need to keep warm. When the off-cuts came, we were so over-catered that what was at first a quandary, is recast as a difficulty so comprehensively resolved as to become an opening for great comfort and security. In the same way, God’s extravagant reply to human need gives faith its quietness and confidence.



Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian, said that faith is like floating on a sea 70,000 fathoms deep. If you thrash about in an effort to stay on top and survive, you will drown. If you lie back and breathe slowly in and out, you will float. You will live! Faith entrusts to the massive buoyancy of God.

Jesus taught about faith by describing its opposite. “*Do not be anxious about your life. Why are you anxious about what you will eat, what you will wear? See how the lilies of the field grow: they do not labor or spin. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not be anxious*” (Matthew 6:25-31). Faith’s opposite is not doubt, it is anxiety. Big anxiety equals little faith.

In its biblical sense, faith is a worldview. It is a way of looking at the universe and us in it. Un-faith is an anxious worldview, one in which the subject always asks, “*Who will ascend to heaven to bring Christ down? Who will enter the abyss to bring Christ up from the dead?*” Such questioning implies its own answer: No one! It’s up to us to follow the instructions, and the possibility of getting it wrong means that existence is clouded over with terrible consequence. Dread possibilities attend one’s life as a husband, wife, parent, employer, worker, or citizen. Things *might* come out alright, but they probably won’t.

Poet John Obrien pictures this harassed and defeated outlook, which is the opposite of faith. His poem is set in an Australian farming community early last century.

## ONE CRIMINAL

No man’s really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; till he’s realized how much right he has to all this talk of “criminals,” as if they were apes in the forest, ten thousand miles away; till he’s got rid of all the dirty self-deception of talking about low types and deficient skills; till he’s squeezed out the last drop of oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe under his own hat.

-C.K. Chesterton: THE SECRET OF FATHER BROWN.



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## A Paradox

We all know people who are perfectionists. They tend to be demanding of themselves and those around them, and they manifest an obsessive orderliness that is, in the end, alienating . . .

In defense of perfectionism, it might be said that obsessive people make the world function for the rest of us. Who, after all, wants to be operated on by a relaxed surgeon, or fly on an airplane maintained by mechanics satisfied when their work is 'good enough'?

The problem with perfectionists and their preoccupation with control is that the qualities that make them effective in their work can render them insufferable in their personal lives. To be less controlling in their jobs would render them ineffective. The best one can hope for is to introduce them to the **paradox of perfection**: in some settings, notably in our



intimate relationships, we gain control only by relinquishing it.  
- Gordon Livingstone. TOO SOON OLD, TOO LATE  
SMART. pp. 43, 44.

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*'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,  
In accents most forlorn.  
Outside the church 'ere mass began,  
One frosty Sunday morn.*

*The crops are done, ye'll have your work  
To save one bag of grain.  
From 'ere way out to back-o-Bourke,  
They're singin' out for rain.*

*'If rain don't come this month,' said Dan,  
And cleared his throat to speak;  
'We'll all be rooned' said Hanrahan,  
'If rain don't come this week.'*

*In God's good time down came the rain,  
And all the afternoon,  
On iron roof and window pane,  
It drummed a homely tune.*

*And every creek a-banker ran,  
And dams filled over top;  
'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan,  
If this rain don't stop.*

*And stop it did; in God's good time:  
And spring came into fold  
A mantle o'er the hills sublime,  
Of green and pink and gold.*

*And O the smiles on every face,  
As happy lad and lass,  
Through grass knee-deep on Casey's place,  
Came riding down to mass.*

*There'll be bush-fires for sure, me man,  
There will without a doubt."  
'We'll all be rooned,' said Hanrahan*

Hanrahan makes his way through life like a child that has suffered abuse. He feels there is an innate spitefulness at the heart of reality. He winces and cringes through his days, waiting for the next injustice, the next unreasonable blow to fall. He is apprehensive. His instinct is to be on alert at all times to brace himself for the next installment of outrageous fortune. He believes that the odds are stacked against him; he has to be watchful.

There are people, despite their belief in God, who make similar heavy weather of their life journey. They have a notion that by permitting them to be born, God has supplied them with a flat-pack and set of instructions. Now, it's up to them to get it right. When setbacks and sorrows come, they are sure it must be because they got it wrong; they failed to follow the instructions to the letter. They didn't reach high enough, didn't go deep enough. They never prayed enough, didn't pray with enough intensity or didn't use the right form of words.

The deity associated with faith of this kind is an unpleasant kind of person, a spoiler. He's a saboteur, waiting to tear down our best efforts. He is a God to be wary of, likely to let loose any kind of pestilence upon persons who don't get it right. It is a faith model to make people severe and grim. Being serially vanquished, they lack both hope and joy. They say to themselves and to others who share their outlook, "We'll all be 'rooned' if we don't have more faith, better faith, or truer faith."

There's an expression that was oft used during the depression era: 'Keeping the wolf from the door.' It refers to the exhausting, often depressing effort to stave off economic ruin.

The faith commended by Scripture is not a preoccupation with keeping the divine wolf from the door, keeping God at bay, keeping him satisfied, making sure he will continue to be our patron. Rather, faith is an orientation of the self toward the God who is like Jesus, toward a God who is exceedingly generous, utterly big-hearted, and kind. He makes his rain fall on the just and the unjust. He is infinitely patient, and unfailingly compassionate. To his enemies and friends, he gives 'good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.'

Faith is a trustful commitment of the self into the purposes and safekeeping of such a God as this. "Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you." 