

*DOES GOD  
REALLY  
MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE?*

DAUGHTER: “I can’t believe it’s still here. This is my hiding place. So many memories.”

FATHER: “So many years. Sometimes it seems you were eight last week. I can still see the way your face lit up the Christmas you got Maggie.”

DAUGHTER: “Maggie and I were inseparable. Remember, I always wanted

2 Does God really make a difference?

you to use the handicapped parking because my doll had a lisp.”

FATHER: “You had a heart as big as the ocean.”

DAUGHTER: “You know what, Dad? This is where I used to pray to God when I was little. I’d tell Him everything. He was as real as those leafy branches up there. Dad, can I ever be sure like that again? Now, I wonder if talking to God is any different from talking to Maggie. Did one conversation just echo in my head and the other echo across the galaxy? Everything now is so up in the air. Sometimes I wish I had something to really hold onto.”

Do you believe it’s possible to get back to the roots of faith? Back to a time when it sprang up strong and tall as an

oak tree?

Have you noticed what's happening in the wake of terrorist attacks that are eroding national security in America, and in the rest of the world? People are reaching back to traditional beliefs. People are trying to find something solid to hang onto. People are trying to find a solid foundation for their faith.

Cynicism is out. Making light of allegiance and devotion doesn't make sense anymore. We realize we're in a dead-earnest struggle against the enemies of freedom and democracy. We're looking through the smoke toward a flag we hope is still standing.

That's where we are today. Needing to believe that the truth will prevail. But

#### 4 Does God really make a difference?

needing, more than ever, some kind of solid ground for that faith.

How about we take a few moments to look at this together? Let's discover a foundation for our faith which will enable us to meet the challenges of life.

Maybe we can get back to a place where things are more sure. Maybe we can find a place of peace in a world that won't quite stop shaking.

Here's one big challenge people are facing today. They're wondering - Does God really make a difference? Does He really change people? That's an important question. A solid faith, a faith with roots, has to be connected to a God who makes a difference in our lives, a God who elevates humanity.

Here's one reason this question haunts people today: scandals in the church, terrible crimes seeping into the church.

Some time ago, people in Boston were shocked to hear that perhaps up to 70 priests in the Archdiocese had abused young people in their care. Catholics were appalled: priests molesting young children. In some instances church leaders had failed to stop the perpetrators.

And then the scandal spread far beyond Boston. People of faith, in general, were deeply troubled. How could so many clergymen be doing such horrible things? It's scandals like these that make people really wonder if God does make a difference in our lives. If those consecrated to His service, if those who've taken vows of celibacy, commit such crimes, what

hope is there for the rest of us?

Something's very wrong if a church ends up protecting child molesters. Something's very wrong if a church can't squarely face serious moral problems among its leaders. Our predicament today is pictured very well in the book of Job. Bildad, one of Job's friends, makes this statement about the one who forgets God. Written long ago, but it describes the very issues that we're facing today: *"He leans on his house, but it does not stand. He holds it fast, but it does not endure. His roots wrap around the rock heap, and look for a place in the stones."* Job 8:15,17 NKJV

Roots wrapped around a pile of rocks. That's how many people feel today. What was supposed to be a solid support is just a rock heap.

Solid ground is hard to come by these days. Where can we put down our roots with confidence? If God doesn't seem to be making a real difference in many churches, where do we find Him? Is He really there? Scandals in the church trouble us. Terror in the name of God troubles us even more. Today, many individuals claim to have joined a holy war. They strap bombs to their stomachs, walk into a restaurant and blow up men, women and children by the score. And they claim to be devout Muslims.

Today, you have people praising the name of Allah because thousands of civilians were incinerated at the World Trade Centre. Is that the difference God makes? Is that what faith and devotion produce? Murderous fanatics are giving religion a bad name, and by so doing manage to hit the headlines. They make us wonder - is

there a good place left where we can put down our roots of faith?

FATHER: “Some Sunday afternoons, I’d come out here and just watch you run through the grass. I’d have a paper to read or a book, but I never read a word. There’s something about a child, the way you tasted the world, fresh, like everything had been created that morning just for you. I’d watch you and all the bad news, the stuff in the headlines just slipped away. Adults have so much baggage. You were lighter than air.”

DAUGHTER: “Before I take off my shoes and run really fast, you think I could catch the magic again? Come on, Dad, go.”

FATHER: “I’m definitely going to register as an old man now, even though the thought



almost kills me!”

DAUGHTER: “The world is so different from when I was a girl. Everyone’s looking over their shoulder these days. It seemed so easy and natural just to reach up back then. It’s almost like I was blindly innocent as a child, that I could reach out my hand and make out a face, a loving face. And now my eyes are wide open and everything’s blurred.”

How do we get through the “heavy stuff?” Does God really make a difference in the world today? Let me show you what I discovered in the nation of Papua New Guinea.

A satellite evangelistic series, originating in Port Moresby’s large stadium, was attended by 100,000 people. Tens of thousands of people made a commitment

10 *Does God really make a difference?*

to Jesus Christ in baptism. What was the result? Did anything change in their lives and in society? Something caught the attention of the nation's newspapers. Major crime decreased dramatically! The decrease was noted for months afterward in various parts of Papua New Guinea. God did make a difference in that country.

I've seen God making a difference all around the world. In my work as a pastor, I've talked with scores of people from many different cultures and listened to their stories. Lives are being transformed. It's exciting. It's dramatic. And most important of all, it's personal.

Let me show you exactly what does make a difference. This is how you sink your roots deep, how you build a strong faith. Jesus laid it out for His disciples very clearly.

This is what He says in John, a powerful, clear statement that goes right to our hearts. Jesus said: *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”* John 15:5 NKJV

Jesus presents Himself as the true Vine. How do human beings “bear much fruit?” That is, how does God make a difference in their lives, how does He produce good results? There’s only one way. We have to abide in Christ. We have to become personally connected to Him. We have to sink our roots into Him as our Saviour, our Lord and our Friend.

And what happens when we don’t maintain this connection? Here’s the next verse: *“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered;*

12 Does God really make a difference?

... “ John 15:6 NKJV

If you don't stay personally connected to Christ, you wither, your spiritual life shrivels up. And you don't produce any fruit.

But the good news is that the True Vine is always there, the connection is always possible.

FATHER: “One day, I came out here and saw you playing a game and talking to yourself. Anyway, I sneaked up, kind-of eavesdropped. I guess you were praying. But what I remember is that it just seemed as though there was nobody else in the world but you and Mr Jesus. That's what you called Him.”

DAUGHTER: “Yeah, I did have a name to go on.”

FATHER: “But you know, it wasn’t that you didn’t have any problems back then. The world wasn’t all innocence and light. You remember that big girl in fifth grade. What was her name?”

DAUGHTER: “Trudy, she was a horror.”

FATHER: “Well, sometimes you’d come home crying and we had to talk to the principal. When someone’s mean to you as a kid, it’s not a little thing. It eats up your whole world. Of course, your Mum and I would always try to make you feel loved and secure, but you also had a Friend, a very important Friend. You could talk it out with Him.”

DAUGHTER: “Mr Jesus!”

FATHER: “The world does change, but friendships don’t have to.”

What made such a dramatic impact in Papua New Guinea, and other places, is this: people were getting personally connected to Jesus Christ. That's what mattered. That's what actually reduced crime in that entire society. People didn't come forward in those meetings to discuss church policy. They weren't just trying to get connected to a religion. They were sinking their roots into a person – the Person of Jesus Christ.

And these were the results I saw. These were the qualities I saw reproduced in people's lives. Paul tells us exactly what the "fruits" are, the fruits of abiding in Jesus the Vine. It's found in Galatians. Paul is very clear as he outlines the fruit of the Spirit: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."* Galatians 5:22,23 NKJV

I've seen it on faces in Papua New Guinea, on faces in Madras, India; on faces in Bucharest, Romania; on faces in London, England, and on faces in Los Angeles, California. God makes that kind of difference. Abiding in Christ makes that kind of difference.

When you're being nourished by that True Vine, the Spirit produces goodness and self-control. People with those qualities don't molest children. They don't abuse their office. The Spirit produces kindness and faithfulness. People with those qualities don't betray a sacred trust.

I believe this is the real reason for the clergy scandals that have troubled so many good people. Sinking your roots into a church is NOT the same as sinking your roots into Jesus. It's possible to have all the

16 *Does God really make a difference?*

right church connections, but to miss out on the one really important connection. It's possible to hold a high church office, and yet wither away spiritually.

Clergymen who hide crimes under their robes are branches that are cut off; they're disconnected.

They're not taking nourishment from the one True Vine that enables human beings to bear fruit. Their roots are wrapped around a pile of rocks.

I believe how a church responds to a crisis tells you a lot about where its roots lie. The Roman Catholic Church isn't the only one to be rocked by scandal in recent years. But its response to the problem of pedophilia among priests is instructive. It has a sobering message for all of us concerned



about faith.

Many church leaders and lay people have worked very hard to make sure that those who abuse their office are held accountable. That they are prevented from hurting more people. But many others, when confronted by the scandal, rush to the defense of church institutions. Their first concern is protecting the priesthood.

One leader, executive director of the Mary Foundation, warned about attacks on the “twin towers” of supernatural life. What are those twin towers? The priesthood and the sacraments. Celibate priests, he wrote, are “Christ among us.” They have the mystical power to make Him supernaturally present in the sacraments.

It’s this kind of response that has troubled

many sincere Catholics. Molesting children is a horribly destructive thing. It's one of the worst kind of betrayals we can imagine.

Well, guess what? Religious leaders are very human. Churches make mistakes, big mistakes. Church leaders aren't perfect.

That's NOT where you want to put down your roots. That's not a firm foundation.

Institutions fail. When scandals erupt, the solution is not to try to prop up the institution. It's not to try to put the clergy in a supernatural category. It's not to protect the "twin towers" at all costs.

Institutions fail. But the True Vine remains. That's where we need to sink deep our faith roots. That's a firm foundation. We need to

find a body of believers where that True Vine is honoured, where people can build a personal connection with Jesus Christ, where God is really making a difference.

Let me share with you something Christ said about HOW we can abide in the Vine. Here is what that personal connection is really all about. Here is what it's based on. Looking at John, chapter 15 again, we read about the very basis of this true connection: *“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.”* John 15:7 NKJV

Abiding in Christ simply means this: Christ's words abide in you. You are studying His Word every day, meditating on His words, applying His words, internalizing His words, taking them into your life and into your heart.

Jesus has wonderful things to tell us. He has the Word that will light up our path. He has the Word that will clear up our confusion. He has the Word that will comfort our hearts. He has the Word that will dispel our doubts. He has the Word that will correct our mistakes. He has the Word that will guide us into eternity.

Jesus has the Word! Listen to what He told the disciples: “ ... *I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.*” John 15:15 NKJV

Jesus is our personal connection to all the wisdom of heaven. He’s our personal connection to the fullness of God. Yes, there’s much good fruit in that one True Vine.

But we have to abide in Him, abide in

His words.

Do you want strong roots for your faith? Send those roots down deep into the Word of God. Take in the words of Christ. You have got to take them in individually. You have got to take them in personally. It's all about communication.

FATHER: "You know what you were doing back then? Just jabbering away with Jesus, going a mile a minute. Your rabbit was sick; you wanted a kite; you needed help with your homework. Oh, and a flood of questions: Why is the sky blue? Will I marry Paulie, the boy down the street, someday?"

DAUGHTER: "Paulie, the freckle-faced kid with the ears!!"

FATHER: "And then you'd repeat some. . ."

DAUGHTER: “Little verses I’d memorized. Yea, I remember! I just thought they were so magical back then. I guess I just ... “

FATHER: “Took everything in, poured everything out?”

DAUGHTER: “Yeah, whatever was in my little head, it just flowed.”

FATHER: “As adults, yes, we do have a lot of filters and fears, but maybe if we close our eyes, extend a hand, you might still find that face again.”

DAUGHTER: “You’re right, Dad. I think we let things slip as we get older and busier. But some conversations are just so important we need to keep them going.”

FATHER: “Listening carefully, talking from the heart, that’s the lesson I’ve had to re-learn several times in my life. I still have your Bible at home.”

DAUGHTER: “The little pink Promises Bible?”

FATHER: “Yeah, well maybe you need a more up-to-date one. They probably have some sophisticated cool chick Bible out now.”

DAUGHTER: “Yeah, absolutely. Show me the pink one first.”

How does God make a difference? It’s one-on-one communion. It’s each branch connected to the vine. It’s the words of Christ flowing into our hearts.

Churches can help that process. Or

sometimes they can get in the way. They can help us understand Christ's words more clearly. Or sometimes church traditions just obscure those words.

Where are your roots today?

I believe the time has come for us to sink our roots into something that's truly divine. However, pride in our traditions can block that process. The right ecclesiastical connections aren't enough. Often we don't go deep enough. We don't go back to that original Vine, back to the words of Christ Himself, back to the source of spiritual nurture - the universal source of good fruit.

Let's be honest about it. Institutions sometimes get in the way of that all-important connection. We have to look at a church in that light. Am I finding a personal



connection with Christ there? Am I seeing His Word honoured there? Am I learning to dig into the riches of Scripture there?

Friends, ancient traditions aren't good enough. A church with a long legacy isn't good enough. What's become clear today is that we can sink our roots into all that - and still wither spiritually. No religious garments, no titles, no privileges, no supposedly supernatural powers, can make up for a lack of connection.

We need to find a place where ALL of God's Word is honoured, where ALL of God's eternal commandments are obeyed. Bending the law to suit our customs just won't do. Making exceptions because of someone's position just won't do. Picking and choosing among Christ's principles just won't do.

In this time of scandal and terror, we need to sink our roots into the eternal, unchanging, ever-fruitful, refreshing, renewing Word of God.

We CAN go back to a time of certainty, to a sense of serenity. We CAN return to that home again. It's not as far away as we might imagine, even in a world of suicide bombers and holy war. God IS making a dramatic difference today. He is doing it one heart at a time. He's doing it through His Word. It's right at our fingertips. A strong, deeply-rooted faith is there for the taking.

Will you determine to find it today? If you've lost touch, will you determine to reach out today? If your spirituality has withered, will you determine to re-establish that connection today? If your

27 *Does God really make a difference?*

faith roots are curling around a pile of rocks, will you determine to sink them deep into the True Vine? Deep into Jesus Christ? Deep into His Word?

Make that decision and you'll discover for yourself that God does indeed make all the difference.

