

THE TRUTH OF THE ASHES

My MOTHER died just 3 months ago, and my family has been GRIEVING. And I was reminded again, in a very POIGNANT way, of the TRUTH and POWER of the words that we hear EVERY year as that cross of ASHES is imprinted on our forehead or palm: *Gordon, remember you are DUST and to DUST you shall RETURN.* And it's TRUE: like my mother – one day we're HERE, and the NEXT day we might be GONE. The SAME thing happened to my Dad back in 2000, and my BEST friend just 3 months LATER. One day they were HERE, and the NEXT, they were GONE. And SO, the words are HAUNTING: *Remember you are DUST, and to DUST you shall return.* That's a POWERFUL truth, isn't it? And there's NO escaping it. It doesn't matter HOW much MONEY we accumulate, how much ALCOHOL we consume, how much SEX we have, how much FOOD we eat or how much WORK we accomplish. WE are DUST, and to DUST we shall return. No, there's NO escaping it! The only QUESTION is: **WHAT will we DO with this truth?**

Of course, most of us DO try to ESCAPE it, or AVOID it, with SOME kind of ADDICTION. OTHERS fall into DESPAIR, and live their lives DEPRESSED. SOME keep WORKING so hard that they don't have time to THINK about it. OTHERS build bigger and bigger BARNs, or HOUSES, to accommodate ALL that they can ACCUMULATE on this earth. But, guess what? NONE of these things WORK, because the TRUTH always WINS! And the truth IS that we are DUST, mere NOTHINGs, and to DUST we shall RETURN. It's a HARD truth, this truth of the ashes, isn't it?

Well, I'd like to suggest ANOTHER approach for dealing with the TRUTH of the ashes. It's the approach of CHANGING our perspective. Do you remember that TV ad that came out a few years ago for *Dunkin' Donuts*? It OPENED with 2 women enjoying a cup of COFFEE as they sat in a BEAUTIFUL national PARK, with either a SUNRISE or SUNSET casting a gorgeous GLOW on the ROCK formations BEHIND them. It LOOKED like they were in the most TRANQUIL place on earth, soaking up the PEACE and quiet of NATURE. But it was only an ILLUSION, because pretty soon, the camera pans OUT, and you discover that the beautiful BACKDROP is just a POSTER. In reality, they're on a crowded SUBWAY car, bumping along on their way to WORK.

You see: it's ALL a matter of PERSPECTIVE, isn't it? We can CHOOSE to live an ILLUSION, if we wish, **OR**, we can CHOOSE the perspective of REALITY, and HEED the truth of the ASHES: that we ARE dust, and to DUST we shall RETURN. And friends, IF we live our lives by the perspective of that REALITY, then we will live our lives very DIFFERENTLY.

It's like being told one day, after your annual physical, that you have CANCER. Furthermore, it's SO far along that there is NOTHING that anyone can DO for you, EXCEPT keep you as PAIN-FREE, and as COMFORTABLE, as possible. Well, this NEWS changes your PERSPECTIVE, doesn't it? NOW, all of a SUDDEN, the things that seemed SO important yesterday no LONGER seem that important. In fact, they may not seem important at ALL, because your PERSPECTIVE has changed!

And THAT'S how we need to deal with the TRUTH of the ASHES. WHEN we feel those dry, dusty ASHES on our foreheads, and hear those TERRIBLE words -- *Remember you are DUST, and to DUST you SHALL return* -- we NEED to see it as an opportunity to ADJUST our perspective. In fact, THAT'S what this holy season of Lent is all ABOUT. It's a season to SLOW down, so that we'll have MORE time to REFLECT and PRAY and STUDY the scriptures. WHY? Well, we NEED that time, and those Lenten DISCIPLINES to help us ADJUST our perspective and REALIZE what life is REALLY about. You see: TOO OFTEN, we live an ILLUSION, an illusion that our LIVES will continue to go ON and ON indefinitely; and that our friends and loved ones will ALWAYS be there; and that WHAT is most IMPORTANT in life is securing our own COMFORT. And UNLESS we somehow get SLAPPED in the face with REALITY, we can go on THINKING this way for MANY years and end up MISSING so much of what life is TRULY about. SO, see the ashes as an OPPORTUNITY, my friends! SEE them as an opportunity to CHANGE your perspective.

And WHAT is the perspective we NEED? Well, it's the perspective of GOD. And HOW do we know GOD'S perspective. Well, we CAN'T know it COMPLETELY, of course, but we CAN know a good deal about it. And we LEARN it in SCRIPTURE, ESPECIALLY as we study the life and ministry, death and resurrection, of JESUS. If you WANT to know GOD, then GET to know JESUS, because JESUS is the BEST portrait that we have of GOD.

But THAT brings us to a DILEMMA, doesn't it? And THAT'S because Jesus CHALLENGES us? Jesus is HARD to UNDERSTAND! Jesus PROVOKES and CONFOUNDS us! Whatever we DO, Jesus seems to want the OPPOSITE. WE use FORCE, and Jesus says: *FORGIVE!* WE are AFRAID, and Jesus says: *TAKE HEART. Do NOT be afraid.* We DOUBT, and Jesus says: *TRUST.* We feel ANGUISH, and Jesus says: *Be CALM.* WE prefer to be ALONE, and Jesus says: *Come, FOLLOW ME.* We make PLANS, and Jesus says: *Let GO.* WE want SECURITY, and Jesus says: *I promise NOTHING.* WE want to LIVE, and Jesus says: *Give UP your LIFE.* WE think we're GOOD, and Jesus says: *Be PERFECT.* WE want to be in CONTROL, and Jesus says: *SERVE, OBEY.* WE want PROOF, and Jesus says: *BELIEVE.* WE want CLARITY, and Jesus talks in PARABLES. WE want POETRY, and Jesus speaks of REALITIES. WE want to be TRANQUIL, and Jesus wants us DISTURBED. WE want REVENGE, and Jesus says: *Turn the other CHEEK.* WE want PEACE, and Jesus says: *I have come NOT to bring PEACE, but a SWORD.* WE want to be GREAT, and Jesus says: *HUMBLE yourself as a CHILD.* WE want to be RICH, and Jesus says: *It is easier for a CAMEL to pass through the EYE of a NEEDLE than for a RICH man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.* WE want HIDE, and Jesus says: *LET your light SHINE.* WE yearn for FIRST place, and Jesus says: *The FIRST shall be LAST, and the LAST shall be FIRST.* WE want to be SEEN, and Jesus says: *PRAY in SECRET. When you do good DEEDS, let not your RIGHT hand know what your LEFT hand is DOING.* No! We just DON'T understand this JESUS. He PROVOKES us. He CONFUSES us. And sometimes, like so MANY of His disciples, WE would rather follow someone ELSE, someone who is more CLEAR, and someone who expects LESS.

HOWEVER, it's the same for US as it was for PETER.... WE don't know anyone ELSE who has the words of eternal LIFE. Who ELSE knows it's SECRET. Who ELSE can offer us LIFE in all its FULLNESS? And SO, we HAVE to keep TRYING to get to know HIS perspective, AND to LIVE by it. SO, may THAT be the work of ALL of us during this HOLY season of LENT. And may we BEGIN right HERE, and right NOW, as we receive the cross of ASHES on our foreheads, and hear again the TRUTH of the ashes: *REMEMBER you are DUST and to DUST you shall RETURN.* Amen.

A MOMENT OF SILENT REFLECTION: Friends, let us NOW take a moment or two in silence. And DURING the silence, let us PREPARE to receive the ASHES by contemplating our lives, and the ILLUSIONS that we LIVE by and build our LIVES upon. And THEN, as the MUSIC begins, let us come forward in a spirit of CONFESSION -- confessing to God our illusions -- and RECEIVE the ashes. Let us also come forward PRAYING that GOD will give us the FAITH and COURAGE we need to CHANGE our perspective, as well as the guidance and wisdom we need in order to see our lives, AND our world, from GOD'S perspective, and NOT just our OWN. Let us be in silence.

THE MUSIC BEGINS

THE IMPOSITION OF ASHES

PRAYER: O God, our Strength and our Redeemer, we have now been marked with ASHES on our foreheads, our palms, or our hearts. May the truth of the ashes CONFRONT us and tear down the illusions that keep us from having life in all its fullness. And hearing the TRUTH of the ASHES, may we CHANGE our perspective and LIVE our lives, as best we can, from YOUR perspective. Guide us during this holy season of LENT, and make us more and more like JESUS, who is our MODEL as well as our SAVIOR, and who has taught us to pray saying, "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.