

The Crisis of Revelation

When you are a young child you are continually in a process of growth and usually this is imperceptible. However, children will experience, from time to time, aches and pains as their bodies change; traditionally these have been called 'growing pains'. Now this may be a sort of 'old wives' tale' statement, but it shut me up as a quickly growing tall kid who experienced such pains often.

As we grow in knowledge as Bible believers we too will, from time to time, get growing pains. Usually we grow in knowledge imperceptibly as we partake of the means of grace, but sometimes there is a crisis. Occasionally, we need to make a significant leap of growth to cater for newly found facts, and this may cut across deeply held views which are threatened by this new knowledge. How we react to this crisis will determine our entire Christian life and growth in grace.

Now there are various ways that we can deal with this crisis. We can embrace it with faith. We can ignore it and hope it will go away. We can build some sort of compromise to fudge the issue. Or we can fight it in dogged determination that our existing dogmatics will not be changed. Only one of these will help us become more like the Lord Jesus.

Crises in growth

Crises are not comfortable; in fact they are downright difficult. Yet life is filled with crises and we have to deal with them all the time. Each crisis is meant to make us stronger, whether it is illness, needing to take responsibility, grief, rejection, setbacks or threats of some sort.

We can use a mountain climbing analogy. Mountain climbers, in the main, make a steady but slow process of ascent up a mountain. Some parts may be a bit more tricky than others, but usually there is a steady, slow upward ascent. However, when one comes to an overhang with no other way round it, one is forced to make a leap, trusting only in the guide-rope or clamps beneath it. This is a crisis. It is not a steady upward climb but a major obstacle that requires leaping off the mountain and trusting in the mechanics of mountain climbing.

Now life is like this; usually there is steady progress but from time to time we experience crises. Growing in grace is no different. Our Christian life could be viewed as a series of crises whereby we make advances of faith based upon our reactions to severe difficulties. It is the coping with crises that bring the furthest advances of faith rather than the steady progress.

Now sometimes these crises are experience based: how do we deal with rejection, slander, grief, loss, suffering etc; but at other times the crisis is centred in struggling to understand a doctrine that is new to us or that threatens long held ideas. These are the most difficult to deal with and the area that many people fail in.

A crisis is also a test. Yet this is no accidental coincidence but a planned test of character supervised by God in order to bring us into more maturity. Crises are designed by God to lead us into truth and make us more mature in Christ.

Biblical examples of crisis

Jesus

The Lord went through a number of crises; such as the wedding at Cana, his baptism, his temptation by Satan, and so on. Each of these had a different purpose and tested a different point of character and provoked a new forward move. If the Lord himself went through crises, there is no reason to think that we will escape them.

The Lord and Peter

Poor Peter endured a number of crises and setbacks in his discipleship, but these were necessary to make him the humble leader of the apostles that he came to be in Jerusalem. The greatest crisis was surely his triple denial of the Lord in the time of his most urgent need. Peter failed this test but I believe that this was planned by God in order to encourage true believers that even the greatest sin is forgivable, if one is elect and confesses and repents properly. Judas felt guilty for his sin and despaired, but he did not confess or repent in a Biblical manner, and was lost (hence being called the 'son of perdition'; Jn 17:12). In the end, Peter was recommissioned by Jesus in a threefold acceptance to match his triple denial (Jn 21:17).

But a shocking crisis came to Peter when the Lord publicly admonished him with a stern rebuke.

Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!' But He turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.' Matt 16:22-23

But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, 'Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.' Mk 8:33

These are the same words that Jesus actually used to rebuke Satan himself (Lk 4:8).

Imagine the horror felt by Peter. He thought he was doing something good, protesting that Jesus should not die on his watch. But he had failed to understand Jesus' teaching that the Son of Man had come to die; that was the purpose of the Messiah's appearing. By trying to do something good in the flesh Peter had actually allowed the devil to take over him for a second – hence the stern rebuke aimed at Satan himself.

Surely this would have taught all the disciples a number of lessons. Particularly that we must always be in the Spirit and that the fleshly response, even if altruistic, is not necessarily the right response. On hearing that Lazarus was near to death the fleshly altruistic response would have been to rush back to Bethany; instead the Lord stayed two more days in Bethabara; about 30 miles away in Peraea (Jn 11:6). God's glory is not served by human responses; he is concerned with resurrection life.

Peter and Paul

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before *them* all, 'If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?' Gal 2:11-21

Peter had approved Paul's Gospel, which affirmed the equality of all men, Jews and Greeks, in justification by faith. However, in these circumstances Peter had allowed himself to be swayed by Judaising legalists and refused to eat with Gentiles. His fear led to

hypocrisy and sin. His sin was serious since it denied the body of Christ; he was not loving the Gentile brethren.

Paul was having none of this and, despite his junior position as a late apostle, he admonished Peter publicly and put him to shame. This created a massive crisis for Peter and how he acted next would determine his whole Christian life and his future effectiveness.

Well, we know that Peter must have repented and agreed with Paul since he continued having effective ministry and later wrote his letter where he equates Paul's writings with Scripture (2 Pt 3:15-16).

This was a watershed moment for Peter where it was necessary to nail his colours to the mast. Thankfully Peter rose to the challenge; however, many believers fail to do this when they face equally humbling crises. When we have done wrong and are admonished by brethren, the easiest thing to do is to repent as quickly as possible. The longer this is delayed the harder it gets to do.

Paul

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Cor 12:7-10

Paul faced a difficult crisis when he sought the Lord to heal him of what may have been glaucoma (Gal 4:15). This not only made it difficult to function but also made his disfigured appearance to others unattractive. Yet God chose not to heal him of this affliction for two reasons. The first was to help prevent pride from rearing up in Paul's character. The second was to reveal to him that grace abounds where there is weakness. Weakness in health is a tool used by God to strengthen the faith of his servants. [Note that Charismatics utterly fail to observe this doctrine.]

So the physical weakness that caused this crisis actually led to a strengthening of faith in Paul and a better testimony (to say nothing of the teaching recorded in Scripture). Sometimes the result of the crisis is not what we expect.

Abraham

We must remember that God is concerned about getting us to live by faith and not by sight. We must not look to this world but to the world to come. Now Abraham is the great example of living by faith, but learning this cost him.

Abraham faced many crises in his wandering life but perhaps the greatest and most important was the call from God to sacrifice his only son; the firstborn of his old age; the son of blessing. Surely this was a call to sacrifice everything that meant anything to the aged Abraham. We do not need to go through the story, you know it well enough; the point is that Abraham obeyed God's command but was prevented from killing his son by the Angel of the Lord at the last moment. This test of obedience resulted in Abraham seeing God in a new way and giving him a new name (Gen 22:14) based on the attribute that he learned afresh (providence). God also reaffirmed the covenant and blessed Abraham as a result. What began as the worst crisis of his life ended up with new revelation and grater blessing.

This is an important discipleship issue. God will sometimes call us to yield something, to lose something, to sacrifice something that we hold dearly. Sometimes it is an aspect of character that has to go; sometimes it is a hobby or a pastime that we enjoy; sometimes it is a person. This is a test to see how much we will obey God, how much we will live by faith and how much we will sacrifice worldly things.

Now it may be that, like Abraham, we will get the object back; the willingness to lose a cherished thing was enough. However, on occasion, the Lord calls us to actually lose that beloved thing and it has to go. Those people that refuse to get rid of what God demands never really grow in their Christian lives at all and one has to question their spiritual status since there is no fruit.

Facing the crisis

The crucial matter in working through a crisis of knowledge is standing firmly on the word of God and that alone. This is where most people come unstuck.

An example - evolution

Frequently we find something in life that questions our foundation on the Bible. A common example, and one that causes devastation to teenagers, is the matter of evolution. Kids who have been brought up in church, who have led outstanding lives, and especially kids who were home-schooled, suddenly come across evolutionary theory head on; perhaps for the first time at university.

The difficulties that this pose are serious. Their teachers will demand that they buy into evolution and will demean their Biblical views as mythology and foolish. Their peers will ridicule them. Overwhelming 'evidence' is thrown at them which purports to be scientific (but often is no such thing). And in the end the poor adolescent believer caves in. Huge numbers of teenage people raised in Christian homes in America have apostatised from the faith for this reason alone. This is perhaps the number one reason for diminishing churches in America.

The kids faced a crisis but were ill equipped to deal with it, for a variety of reasons.

The key issue

The key issue here is the battle between human reason, or science, and Scripture. A person who fails to stand on Scripture will collapse when it comes to a crisis of knowledge. The only way to deal with the fight against evolutionary theory is to be absolutely Biblical. Indeed, this is the only way to deal with any battle of faith and knowledge.

The same action is required of any threat to faith – the believer must stand on the Biblical evidence, and that alone. So when a doctrine is taught which threatens cherished beliefs or practices then the only recourse is to search the Scriptures and find out where the truth lies. Everything else must be set aside and God's word must dominate our thinking.

One problem arises here in that some erroneous doctrines claim to be Biblical but are not. The same action applies; we must focus on properly understanding the word and interpreting it according to its own rules. The doctrine must be examined, with its proof texts, and subjected to a thorough evaluation of Scripture. If it fails this test it must be thrown out.

Be prepared to die

The Bible explains that the way we combat many issues in this life is to undertake that we are dead to the world, dead to sin. These things should find no response in us because we are dead. We died with Christ to sin, the world and the old life and now must act as

resurrected people, people who have repented from the old life and now follow Christ. Thus we are pilgrims journeying onward to a new world having left this old one behind.

For instance, if we just look at one NT book:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Gal 2:20

Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Gal 5:24

The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Gal 6:14

These verses show that the believer in Christ is dead to himself, dead to the world and dead to the flesh and its passions.

So, the way we approach a crisis is not to centre upon what we want or what our character is disposed to, but to be dead to everything except Christ. We are new creatures in Christ and must not expect to develop according to the principles of the world or the flesh. It is a great mistake to excuse moral failings on the basis that '*this is how I am*', or '*this is human nature*'. We are not part of this world and are not human beings in Adam, but are heavenly people in Christ.

In practice this means when facing a crisis we come humbly, empty of ourselves and trust entirely in what God's word says. Jesus sums this up as, '*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me,*' (Lk 9:23). Self-denial is a critical aspect of a life of discipleship.

Secular thinking is one area where this is very difficult. Some people have been brought up in a very strong atheistic education system, which has a big hold on their lives. Nevertheless, if they are to continue in revelation they must face the crisis of denying this secular mindset and devote themselves to God's word. Only those who do this will advance.

The need to grow in knowledge

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, ... for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge. 2 Pt 1:2-4

The point of going through a crisis is learning more truth. This is not just dogmatic truth but the truth about our own character. We need to truly know ourselves and be prepared to change what is not according to Christ.

If we want to grow in grace and peace, we will only do so as we grow in the knowledge of God through Christ. Learning how to cope with this evil world and how to change our character will only come through the knowledge of him who called us. As we grow in the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ our Lord, we learn how to change to become more like them. We learn what is not in accordance with God's perfection and what has to be shed.

For this reason Paul lists the works of the flesh on several occasions, saying that these works of the old man must be put off. Putting off is instantaneous, it does not take a long time but it takes a firm will based on truth. Works that have to go include:

Adultery, fornication,¹ uncleanness,² lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies,³ outbursts of wrath,⁴ selfish ambitions,⁵ dissensions,⁶ heresies,⁷ envy, murders, drunkenness,

¹ Illicit sexual activity; which includes adultery, heterosexual activity and also homosexual sex.

revelries,⁸ and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Gal 5:19-21

For you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere* men? 1 Cor 3:3 [Note that we do not have the option of being mere men, submitting to human nature.]

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are *the things* which defile a man. Matt 15:19-20

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath,⁹ malice,¹⁰ blasphemy,¹¹ filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. Col 3:5-10

All these demonstrate to us the sort of fleshly behaviour that is out-of-bounds for the believer. Make no mistake; such behaviour is forbidden and cannot be countenanced in any way. Such works must be put off immediately, confessed as sin and then the believer repents – that is sets his mind to behaving differently forever; following Christ and not himself.

The crisis of sinning – knowing what to do

We should be grateful that Christ has done all the work in salvation and not left parts of it us to us. Dealing with sin is simple for the Christian; it involves confessing sin (as open as the sin is)¹² and repenting. It does not involve a pilgrimage to a holy place or whipping one's back till it is raw; neither does it involve praying on hard peas or any other form of asceticism. Christ is our salvation; Christ is our forgiveness. God merely demands that we forsake sin and follow Christ (repentance) and confess our faults when we do sin, seeking cleansing by the blood of Christ (1 Jn 1:9).

Therefore we keep short accounts regarding sin; that is, we confess our sins as soon as possible after committing them. We must not delay confession. It is an act of faith to confess sin and seek forgiveness from God despite feeling unclean from a recently committed sin. It is an act of pride to avoid or delay confession. There is no grace in delaying the confession and wallowing in confusion. What is normal Christian behaviour, however, is to mourn for sin. As we come to God in confession we grieve over the fact that we let God down. The more we mourn for our sins, the more we hate committing them; **'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,'** (Matt 5:4).

² Impure living of any sort, including impure motives.

³ Really, fierce indignation, punitive zeal, contentious spirit, rivalry, jealousy.

⁴ Boiling over anger, losing one's temper.

⁵ Strife, pushing oneself forward, factious spirit.

⁶ Divisive, schismatic, factious spirit.

⁷ False teaching from one's own mind which captivates others.

⁸ Partying, usually involving drunkenness, carousing and out-of-control behaviour.

⁹ Passionate anger; boiling over, temper.

¹⁰ Malignant ill-will.

¹¹ Slander of anyone, but especially of God.

¹² Sins committed in secret are to be confessed to God in secret. Sins committed in public must be publicly confessed (i.e. in church). Anyone offended by our sin must be apologised to face to face.

Now if anyone fails to confess their sin it is an extremely serious matter. This will involve personal, and subsequently eldership, admonition. Failing that, the unrepentant person must be expelled from the church and treated as an unbeliever until they repent.

Knowledge precedes righteousness. The more we study Scripture, the more we understand what offends God and seek to avoid such behaviour. We also learn what pleases God and seek to do those things. Understanding the Bible enables us to live right.

Note the words of the psalmist,

Concerning the works of men, by the word of your lips, I have kept away from the paths of the destroyer. Ps 17:4

We avoid falling into the works of the flesh by heeding the word of God.

For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. Gal 6:8

The body

The psalmist Asaph, in Psalm 73, went through a crisis. He was overwhelmed with the injustice of the wicked in the world prospering but the righteous suffering (Ps 73:3, 13-14). It nearly led him to fall away (Ps 73:2) and it caused him grief and suffering (Ps 73:21). This is a genuine crisis and one that virtually every believer has experienced (which is why this psalm is in Scripture).

What changed Asaph's viewpoint only occurred when he involved the body: 'Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end,' (Ps 73:17). Upon being involved with the Lord's people and worshipping God he had a flash of revelation which encouraged him and led him to the truth. Note that he could not resolve this on his own; the situation only changed when he was in fellowship.

This is a very important point to bear in mind. Normal growth is only when we are active in the body. Fellowship is a normal means of growing in Christ. Church fellowship is where we receive of what every other believer has of Christ (1 Cor 12). Now such fellowship may exist where there are very few brethren, a mere handful; and it may not exist at all where there are many brethren, but they are all silenced under the ministry of a single man; that is not fellowship. Body ministry is not only the normal Biblical; church experience but it is vital for growth.

The crisis changed Asaph's perspective on the Christian life forever. Instead of being focused upon material living in this world he viewed things from an eternal perspective; he saw the end of things, not their current status (Ps 73:23-28). This is a vital experience that all believers need to go through. We must begin to perceive things as God sees them by faith, and not how we normally view them, by sight. When we do this, we are not only comforted by truth, but God gives us grace and strengthens us to persevere (Ps 73:26).

Furthermore, what originally seemed to be reasonable knowledge according to his previous experience, he now (seeing it from a heavenly perspective) realised that he was in ignorance and sin (Ps 73:22). Moving on in knowledge (and consequently experience) leads to a growing testimony to God; and this is the purpose of growth (Ps 73:28).

This is typical of a crisis of revelation. It is a psalm that everyone should study and meditate on frequently because it is so applicable to us all.

Conclusion

Growing in revelation often involves a crisis, and so we should not be surprised that crises feature in the Christian life. Indeed, genuine teachers will face more crises than most because they need to grow in knowledge the most.

When the trial comes we need to embrace it in faith, trusting that God is our loving heavenly Father and that this trial is for our good, and then seek to understand the Biblical truth relevant to our crisis and learn from it. God is after our perfection, and this perfection (maturity) comes through many crises.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. Jm 1:2-4

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