

The Soul Needs a Centre – Ephesians 5:14-16, James 1:13-16, Psalm 62:5-8

When Lise and I moved to Nanaimo we bought a house that was located within a few hundred feet of three known mine shafts. Because of this, our house did not have a basement but a large concrete pad upon which the house was built. The reasoning went like this: if a sink hole opened up under the house it would not be big enough to swallow the whole structure.

That was reassuring!

I doubt it would have concerned me much if it was not for the fact that I read about a man in Florida who went into the family home, a home that had been in his family for several generations, and suddenly the floor opened up and the house was swallowed up by a huge sinkhole. It appears the limestone upon which the house was built had slowly been eaten away by acid rain and soon there was not enough rock to support the house. The house collapsed into the crater formed under it, along with the owner of the house.

Author Gordon MacDonald, in his book “Ordering Your Private World”¹ wrote about a condition called the “sinkhole syndrome” that can happen in the human life. He says that it can be triggered by a failure at work, a severed relationship, harsh criticism from a parent, or for no apparent reason at all. But it feels like the world has given way.

People tend to focus on the things around them, the externals, spending more time at work, building a bigger portfolio, enrolling in another class or course, moving into a new circle of friends, spending more time at the gym, getting a new wardrobe or hair due... people try so many ways to build up the world around them, but spend very little to no time caring for their soul. The soul is unseen, so it is forgotten... and soon people are hollow and dead inside, and life is dangerously close to collapsing...

Jesus spoke of this in the words of our verse of the month: **“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” Matthew 16:26**

As people lack a center in their lives they will be tossed back and forth from one opinion to another, one mission to another, one focus to the next. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, for they were in danger of losing their centre, forgetting that their relationship with Jesus was everything and all else was secondary. Instead of staying focused on growing in Christlikeness, they had lost their center and they were tempted to live for pleasure, living a life of greed and sensuality. So the Apostle writes to them to hold fast to their faith in Jesus, that which centres them, saying:

“Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful

¹ George MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984) 15.

scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is Christ.” Ephesians 4:14-15

The soul will find its centre when Jesus is the focus of one’s life. If we choose to pursue something more than we pursue our relationship with God through Christ, then we are headed for disaster. The sinkhole is forming, and it is only a matter of time before things collapse. You can paint the house as beautifully as you like, and put on a new doorknob and hang the grandest drapes, but if a sinkhole develops below the house none of those things will stop the house from crashing down into that hole.

So what does it look like when a person has lost his or her centre?

In James 1:5-8 we read this:

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

The word translated “double-minded” can also be translated “double-souled” or “split-souled.” It is the un-centred soul.

Can you see one sign of the un-centred soul? It has a hard time making decisions.

In this passage, it appears that a person needs direction from God, so they ask for wisdom. That is a good start. But because this person is “double-minded” – they have an un-centred soul – they start moving one direction, believing that is what God wants, then turn and head another direction, doubting themselves and what they have heard from God. James describes them like a wave on the sea, driven forward one moment and backwards the next.

In the New Testament we see Pontius Pilate like this. The people bring Jesus to him and ask him for a verdict. Pilate knows Jesus is innocent of any crime, but he is afraid the people might riot if he lets Jesus go. Pilate fears the wrath of Rome if he doesn’t keep the peace but he also does not want to appear soft. He tries to find an out, asking if the crowd would rather have a notorious murderer set free or this man, Jesus. The crowd chooses the murderer. Pilate had the authority to do what was right, but his soul did not have a centre, so he did not know when to take a stand for justice.

Contrast that to John the Baptist. Here was a man who was centred on doing what God wanted him to do. He wore simple clothing (camel hair cloak and leather belt!) and ate simple foods (locust and wild honey) because those externals meant nothing to him. He was determined to be “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare ye the way of the Lord!” He fearlessly spoke the truth, even when he was arrested for what he said, and it eventually cost him his life. But he would not back down or change his message. He pointed people to Jesus. His soul had a centre.

Without a centre, John Ortberg suggests that the soul constantly feels vulnerable to people or circumstances.²

In the Old Testament we read about how King David's son, Absalom, turns on him and tries to snatch the throne from David. Absalom has a large following so David flees the royal city with his family and followers. Emotionally and physically David is soon spent. He feels vulnerable, at the mercy of Absalom, and fears the collapse of his kingdom.

In 2 Samuel 16:14 we read: **¹⁴The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted. And there he refreshed himself.**

The Hebrew for "refreshed himself" literally means "re-souled" himself. He found his center again, turning to the Lord.

The great prophet Elijah confronted the wicked queen Jezebel and her 500 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. There Elijah won a great victory by trusting in God to send fire. The prophets of the false god were put to death and Queen Jezebel was furious. She put a price on Elijah's head, so he ran, and ran, and ran until he was totally exhausted. In that place of brokenness, Elijah was so low he begged for death. But God came and ministered to him, giving him rest and food for his body, the still-small voice to renew his mind, and a renewed will to keep fighting against evil. God came and helped Elijah find the centre for his soul, and his soul was restored.

Ortberg notes that the soul without a centre lacks patience.³

Job, the man who suffered so much yet held true to God is said to be "long souled." Men like Samson who "rambles from pursuit of power to pleasure to women to revenge"⁴ is described as "short-souled."

King Saul is another "short-souled" character from the Old Testament. He did not have patience. As king, he gathered his army to battle the Philistines. He wanted the prophet Samuel to come and offer a sacrifice and pronounce a blessing on his army. Samuel was late in coming, so the soldiers started to get restless and start to abandon Saul. So Saul takes matters into his own hands and does what no king should do – he assumed the role of the priest. His impatience cost him the crown and his soul.

Ortberg goes on to suggest the soul without a centre is easily thrown. To illustrate, he tells of the day he, a pastor and not a cowboy, rode the mechanical bull. No one in the crowd was willing to get on the thing, so when prodded by his friends, John Ortberg gave it a try.

The man who ran the mechanical bull took one look at the middle aged Ortberg and said, "Are you sure you want to try?" Of course, that sealed the deal – he had to ride the bull now.

² John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 100.

³ John Ortberg, 101.

⁴ Ibid

The operator told John Ortberg the secret was to keep centred, stay flexible and do not try and control the ride. Keep moving and don't hold on too tight.

John Ortberg got on the bull and it started to move, slowly at first. The first reaction was to tense up, but he remembered to relax, so he tried. But as the bull jumped and twisted he was all over the place, barely holding on. His arms flailed and his seat was seldom on the bull's back, but when the bull started to slow down and stop, he was still on. It wasn't pretty, but he succeeded. He was sure the operator would be stunned and would congratulate him, but all he said was, "That was level one."

Level two lasted maybe a second. The bull won.

Then Ortberg reflects: "Sometimes life comes to us at level one... It shuffles along without major complications. Level one is the week after your honeymoon when nothing is more exciting or complicated than finding a place to store the three blenders you got as wedding gifts. Life never stays at level one."⁵

You know that is true. Suddenly there is trouble at work, trouble with your health, trouble with the kids, trouble with your faith... Stuff happens, and if our soul does not have a centre, you are in trouble. No matter how hard you hold on, you will be thrown off the bull.

The soul must be centred in God. Jesus said, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.**" (Matthew 11:28). This is an invitation to find the centre for your soul.

A man was remembering the days when his son was three years old. When the boy was tired, or scared, or just needed to be held he would reach out his arms and say, Hodja, Daddy, Hodja."

Many years later that little boy, now grown and married, came home from work and discovered that his wife had left him for another man. The man was devastated, and phoned his father and asked if he could come over. Of course he could, so he drove five hours to his parents home, walked through the front door and collapsed in his father's arms. The father said he could almost hear the words of the little boy in that moment, "Hodja, Daddy. Hodja."⁶

The soul centred in God knows there is always a place to go that will not give way, that will be a firm place to stand no matter how the ground around them is collapsing. The Psalmist understood this and wrote:

**Yes, my soul, find rest in God;
my hope comes from him.**

**⁶ Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.**

⁷ My salvation and my honor depend on

God;

he is my mighty rock, my refuge.

**⁸ Trust in him at all times, you people;
pour out your hearts to him,
for God is our refuge. (Psalm 62:5-8)**

⁵ Ortberg, 103.

⁶ Ortberg, 104.