

## More Than A Facelift

*Psalm 119:33-40*

**I**n India, before Christ was born, certain types of criminals were punished by having their noses amputated. To repair the damage, ancient Hindu physicians would cut from the cheek of the patient a piece of flesh of the approximate size and shape required to rebuild the nose. We don't know if the patients were satisfied with their new noses, but we do know that that was the beginning of a form of surgery known today as "plastic" surgery. Modern techniques originated just after World War I, as surgeons began rebuilding bodies disfigured in combat.

Today, plastic surgery has developed into two major branches. Approximately forty percent of plastic surgery is performed for **cosmetic** reasons, to improve the appearance of the patient. Sixty percent of the people who undergo plastic surgery, however, need much more than cosmetic plastic surgery. A birth defect, injury caused by war, accident or burn, or surgery itself often requires the patient to undergo **reconstructive** plastic surgery.

David in the Old Testament didn't know anything about plastic surgery, but he knew *something* had to change in his life. It would have to be something more than he had been able to produce in his own power. He had simply run out of steam. Perhaps he was responsible for the mess in his life, or maybe the circumstances were to blame. Obviously there were some who couldn't stand him, some who criticized, misinterpreted or misunderstood his every move. Even the king wasn't exempt from that kind of unnecessary backbiting by those who felt a personal calling from God to be the king's watchdog.

He was tired of it. With all these people nipping at his heels like a pack of wild dogs, David's spirit had suffered. As a result, he needed a fresh beginning—not a facelift or a covering over of the real problem or a temporary solution. He didn't want things smoothed over or solved only temporarily. David didn't need a change in his life in a mere cosmetic sense; he needed what we could call reconstructive surgery on his relationship with God.

Perhaps today you stand in the same spot as David, taking a survey of your life and your relationship with God. You realize that your spiritual life needs plastic surgery, and only the reconstructive kind will do. Life is flat. Your heart is empty. Your relationship with God has lost its delight and joy. It could have happened for any number of reasons, but the point is that you need to experience a renewal in your heart and relationship with God. Something needs to change, and change

soon! David felt the same way, but he discovered that in order to receive the renewal he craved, he had to pass through several different levels of commitment.

First, there was **evaluation**, v. 26, as he took an honest look at his life before God. Then there was **meditation**, first on the wonders of God, v. 27, and then on the Word of God, v. 48. That was followed by **dedication**, w. 29-32, as he committed himself afresh to God. But there had to be something else, or he would find himself going through this same cycle again and again. Something had to be different. So he had to go through a fourth level in his quest for renewal. We see this level in verses 33-40, and we call this one **modification**.

David prayed—earnestly and sincerely—that God would do something in his life to modify him. In verse 25, David prayed, *"Renew my life according to Your Word."* In verse 28, his request was, *"Strengthen me,"* the same concept of renewal. It is expressed with different words in verse 32, when David declares, *"I run in the path of Your commands, for You have set my heart free."* That's renewal!

But David didn't stop there. *"Renew my life"* was his plea in verses 37 and 40, while in verse 88, his prayer was, *"Preserve my life according to Your love."* He prayed for renewal again in verses 149 and 154. What the Psalmist prayed for was more than a mere covering over of the real problem in his heart. He knew he needed the kind of renewal that goes down deep. No mere cosmetic adjustment would recover the kind of rejuvenation in his spirit he required. So in verse 33, in keeping with what David has been asking in this psalm, he prays that God would teach him to follow His Word. How was that a prayer for renewal?

A request to be taught is a request to be changed. Those who submit to teaching of any kind are hopefully changed as a result of what they learn. Most of us were taught to read, and that knowledge changed us, opening up entirely new worlds to us. When we were taught to drive a car, our lives were changed, as we assumed more independence, and were able to travel perhaps to places we'd never been. A request to be taught is a request to be changed.

In another area in the Psalms, we see another time when David was in need of renewal, besides the occasion in Psalm 119. He said, *"I spread out my hands to You; my soul thirsts for You like a parched land. Selah. Answer me quickly, O LORD; my spirit faints with longing. Do not hide Your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit."* He really needed renewal in his spirit, didn't he? And he needed more than a mere facelift, more than a simple cheering up. But he kept his eyes on the Lord, in spite of the bad times. He continued, *"Let the morning*

*bring me word of Your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in You. Show me the way I should go, for to You I lift up my soul. Rescue me from my enemies, O LORD, for I hide myself in You.*" Then he said something which reminds us that renewal cannot come without being taught: *"Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; may Your good Spirit lead me on level ground"* (Psalm 143:6-10). Something needed to change in his life, and he realized that it would come only as he learned from God how to walk in the right paths. A request to be taught is a request to be changed.

The disciples of Jesus realized one day that something was sadly lacking in their relationship with God through prayer. They had seen Jesus in prayer, and they knew that He received His strength from those special times which He spent alone with the Father. Something had to change in their lives if they were going to have that power. So they approached Jesus one day just as He was finishing one of those prayer times. What was their request? *"Lord, teach us to pray. . . "* (Luke 11:1). They were asking that they should be changed in their relationship with God through prayer. A request to be taught is a request to be changed.

Psalm 119:33 is where we see renewal beginning to take place in David's life. Numerous times between verses 33 and 40 did David plea for a change, using different words and ideas each time. For example, the prayer that God would teach him was similar in essence to the request in verse 35, *"Direct me in the path of Your commands,"* or to the one made in verse 36, *"turn my heart toward Your statutes."* He was asking God to change him by teaching him how to follow His Word. In fact, there can be no renewal without change. The very idea of renewal has built into it the elements of change, whether it be on a political, corporate, personal or spiritual level.

Let us not fool ourselves into thinking that we are somehow exempt from the need for change in our lives. If I am in need of renewal today, it is because something is not right between me and God. That something needs to be changed. For the truly serious Christian, this change, or modification, must come in two major areas.

## **1 There must be a change in our Lifestyles, w. 33-35**

This modification has an *outward* focus, in that it affects the way we live. It affects the relationships we have with other people. We must come to the place where we admit that we do not have all the answers, that we do make mistakes, and that we are sinners in need of the grace of Christ. Renewal cannot come until there is a change in our lifestyles. How does this happen? When we look at verses 33-35 we find three necessary ingredients.

### **First, we must learn God's Word, v. 33.**

David's plea was *"Teach me, O Lord, to follow Your decrees."* If we are honest with ourselves before God, as genuine evaluation requires, we will have to admit that we do not know as much of God's Word as He has revealed to us. Some of us are constantly chasing after some new, exciting teaching, when all we really need to know about God is contained right here in the pages of God's Word. We cannot discover the path to renewal through mere intuition, common sense, research, or guessing. We do not stumble across it by accident. It is a path which must be taught to us by God Himself.

David realized this truth. The prayer, *"Teach me, O Lord,"* is seen first in Psalm 119 in verse 12, and is repeated *seven* additional times before the psalm ends. He really meant it—this was not vain repetition. The same must hold true for us today. If renewal is truly the desire of our hearts, then we must submit ourselves to God, that He might teach us from His Word.

### **Second, we must understand God's Word, v. 34.**

Here, David's plea for modification took the form of *"Give me understanding, and I will keep Your law and obey it with all my heart."* It is never enough to merely know God's Word. Being a physician is more than merely knowing what medicines to give or when surgery is required. A practical understanding of that knowledge is essential. Understanding what we know of God's Word is a necessary ingredient for our experiencing modification in our lifestyles. God's Word has the awesome power to change us and set us free. It has the power to mold us and shape us and conform us to the image of Christ. That power is not unleashed through head knowledge. It must be comprehended by the mind and heart before any renewal can erupt in our lives.

### **Third, we must do God's Word, v. 35.**

David cried, *"Direct me in the path of Your commands, for there I find delight."* He simply meant that neither knowing nor understanding God's Word would be of any lasting value unless he could discover how to apply God's Word to his daily life. James said the same thing in the New Testament: *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* (James 1:22).

Vance Havner was born and raised in the North Carolina hills, and became known as "America's Twentieth Century Prophet" before his death in 1986. In his book *Jesus Only* Havner wrote, *"Chief among the besetting sins of the saints is hearing without doing. . . . In Ezekiel's day they heard the preacher, complimented him,*

*told others about him, but did nothing about the message. The centuries have passed, and today we listen to preachers, invite others to hear them, congratulate them with that very doubtful compliment, 'I enjoyed your sermon.' But we do nothing about it. ... Truth heard and not acted upon is a dangerous thing. Spiritual impulses which are not translated into action have a disastrous reaction." Oswald Chambers wrote, "The greatest insult you can offer God is pious talk unless it is backed up by holy actions."*

It is a tragic fact which must be admitted before we can go any further: the main reason we stand in need of renewal is because we have not taken the time nor made the effort to **learn** what God says in His Word, to study to **understand** what God says in His Word, or lived in such a way as to **do** what God says in His Word. We live from day to day, fooling ourselves with nothing but good intentions, all the while living with no joy or delight in our hearts for the things of the Spirit of God.

There must be a radical modification in our lifestyles before there can be renewal. When we begin to apply God's Word in a practical way not only to our spiritual lives but also to our family lives, our marriages, our businesses, our school work, our attitudes, our finances, our philosophies, and anything else that constitutes lifestyle, we open ourselves up to God that He might work renewal in our lives. Lifestyle deals with our outer actions. But the area of lifestyle is just one of the areas which must be changed if we are to have renewal.

## **2 There must be a change in our Loyalties, w. 36-37.**

This modification has an inward focus, in that it concentrates on the things inside us that make us who we are. If I am faithful to Christ, then it is because there has been an inner change in my life which has drastically altered my allegiances. I have forsaken myself and placed Christ as absolute Lord over my life. He alone is worthy to receive that kind of loyalty and commitment. But we human beings care for ourselves too much for this change in loyalty to come easily. It is a battle which must be faithfully waged day after day by those who seek to know and follow the heart of Christ.

We learn here in Psalm 119 that our loyalties are modified by first **turning our hearts toward the Word, v. 36**. David knew this was a matter of the heart, so he prayed, *"Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain."* Left to ourselves, we would not naturally seek out the Word of God. Our hearts have been twisted by sin; it is part of our sin-nature to ignore or become apathetic to the Word of God. Having our hearts turned toward the Word of God is an act of God which cannot be imitated or duplicated. If God does not turn our hearts toward His

Word, its truths become difficult to comprehend, if not meaningless. Renewal of our relationship to God involves a redirecting of our loyalties toward the Word of God as the ultimate authority for our faith and practice of the Christian life. We are drawn back to its pages with an awesome magnetic force. The Holy Spirit draws us to Himself, and turns our hearts toward His Holy Word. George Sweeting has said, *"The very same Holy Spirit who led these men to write, longs to lead us today so we can understand. Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible is like an ocean which cannot be sounded, heavens which cannot be surveyed, mines which cannot be explored, and mysteries beyond unraveling. We must—we must—yield to the leadership of the Holy Spirit."*

But we also learn that our loyalties are modified by turning our eyes away from the worthless, w. 37, 39. David then prayed, *"Turn my eyes away from worthless things"* (v. 37), and *"Take away the disgrace I dread"* (v. 39), which obviously refers to the disgrace which would come should he focus on what was worthless.

How many of us have our loyalties focused on the worthless, on the things which really don't matter—or which won't matter in just a short period of time? We should take stock of our loyalties, and examine the value of those things, or causes, or organizations, or people, in the light of eternity. In just twenty short years, will it have mattered? Will it have made a difference? The very real danger in being loyal to what is worthless in the eyes of God is that we become worthless ourselves. This is a direct teaching of Scripture.

In 2 Kings 17, we see that the Israelites had sinned against God by worshipping other gods. Verse 9 reads, *"The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right."* They did them in secret, but God knew them, and as a result, the people were carried away into captivity in Assyria. The commentary of Scripture is a sad one: *"They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. (And listen to this!) **They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, 'Do not do as they do,' and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do"*** (2 Kings 17:15). The word for us today is that we should beware of that to which we give our allegiance, lest we become like that thing. Giving our allegiance and loyalty to God has the same result: we become more and more like Christ.

None of us can have renewal in our hearts and lives today if we are not willing to be changed, in both our outward lifestyles, and our inward loyalties. Are you willing to submit to the teaching of God's Word, that He might instruct you and

lead you in the paths you ought to go? Are you willing to undergo the radical change in your life that renewal requires?

Then let's face it: cosmetic plastic surgery won't do. Much more than a facelift is required. Our entire lives must be reconstructed by the One Who made us, Who died for us, and Who lives for us.