

Growing in Christ

PART 18: 'DON'T CLING TO THE FIREWOOD'

It's late autumn - time to start gathering firewood for the winter. That's where I am, early one morning many years ago, on a farm the other side of Blayney in central western NSW - all alone with a pile of firewood I had cut previously - loading it into my trailer. Then I see them ...

They're just a young couple, I can tell. These mouse-holders who have taken up residence in the woodpile are just starting out in life. They've built a home under the pile of firewood I am loading into the trailer. We have just had one of our first frosts. So have this mouse couple. It's about zero degrees. But at the bottom of the woodpile their nest would be dry and warm in all but the wettest of storms, ready for the young ones that would surely be coming soon. They had set up such a comfortable, peaceful, predictable home. Which reminded me our first home as a married couple all those years ago. We too were so excited, so optimistic, so comfortable, so predictable.

These are tiny mice, equipped with miniature jumping legs, their little bodies only 3-4 cms long - if you don't count the tail. I must seem like some huge brutal giant as I ruthlessly deconstruct their carefully built lives, one log at a time. I feel sorry for them. Such cute little creatures, so hopeful for the future, yet so filled with terror at what is happening to them.

"*What's going on, dear?*" the mouse bride cries.

"*I don't know,*" her husband answers.

"*Nothing like this has ever happened before.*"

He's wrong, of course. Change is always with us. But, thankfully, it's not too often that our entire lives are altered forever by external events. But it can happen. Some of you have been there, I know:

- > The death of someone close to you ...
- > A painful divorce ...
- > The loss of a job ...
- > The failure of a business ...
- > An illness or injury ...
- > Wayward children that break your heart ...
- > An ugly dispute in your family ...
- > A major split in your Church ...

Suddenly, life is not the same and probably never will be again. Everything is different. We try to cope - sometimes in healthy ways, sometimes in self-destructive ways.

So I keep loading the firewood into the trailer. I'm about to stack it higher when I see one of the tiny mice clinging to a piece of firewood in the back of the trailer. Another few seconds and he would have been crushed by the next log. So I pick him up by his long tail, gently place him on the ground, and go back to get more logs. When I return he is still at the same place on the ground where I put him - stunned and paralysed by this unexpected disaster in his life, barely able to get out of harm's way.

Does that sound familiar? Ever been stunned in the midst of a disaster in your life? Change comes and turns us on our head, and life goes on in spite of us, and yet we feel frozen in time, paralysed by the shock of what is happening and in vain we try to cling to yesterday's props as they are being dragged off the set. A new chapter is being ushered into our lives and we frantically cling to those familiar things in the previous chapter.

But we can't, not safely anyway. When the upheaval is major and the very foundations of our world are shaken or even removed - we just have to start again. We have to re-build. We have to set up our home in the new reality of this chapter of our lives. Whether we like it at first or not. All too often we are hurt or disillusioned because of our inability to let go, so attached to the past, or an image of the past, that it's impossible for us to truly welcome the future.

I still remember my first chapter in this life - as a young boy running around our farm at Forest Reefs, near Orange. I remember our long driveway out to the main road and the day a 3 year old version of me walked all the way to the front gate with my little Globite suitcase full of undies, socks, one shirt and a toothbrush - having just announced to my mother that I was running away because she was so mean to me expecting me to tidy my room two days in a row! I also remember her helping me pack and wishing me a safe trip, knowing I would get to the gate, contemplate the frightening world beyond, and run back to mum!

Apart from traumatic moments like that, being a young boy for me was pretty good. Life was so simple. School was great back then: Kindergarten to Year 6 all in the one room at the little Forest Reefs School. Great times. Then it happened ... I woke up one day and I was a teenager, with pimples and attitude surrounded by people who just didn't know anything! I never asked for that change - it just happened - and whilst being a teenager was a heap of fun too – some days it was horrid and I just wanted to go back to being that little boy on the farm, but I couldn't.

Then, just as I was finally getting a handle on what it meant to be a teenager - I was married! Then another new day dawns - I discover am are going to be a father. But my anticipation was short-lived and the devastation of a miscarriage ends all that excitement of having our first child.

But time heals and another new day comes and our first child finally arrives. More change, more adjustment, far less sleep! But within weeks of her arrival, a phone call comes that rips my familiar woodpile apart completely, as news of my father's sudden death rings in my ears. He was with us only 54 years.

Another change, another chapter, a most unwelcome one at that, another adjustment, another need to move on and start again and not cling to the past. Then before I know it, I have a quiver full and I am well into the mid-life crisis I have worked so hard for over many years. I have it all now: the mortgage, the car loan, five lunch boxes lined up in a row every morning, school fees, homework I don't understand, report cards I wish I didn't understand, credit cards I understand all too well! And then there's the sleepless nights, the doctor's bills, the dentist's bills and the queues to use the bathroom!

Each new chapter in life requires huge adjustments and strong determination to go on regardless because you can't go back. You must embrace the new day and move on, not clinging to the past, but praising God for what you had yesterday, as you reach out to embrace what He has planned for tomorrow. Change requires courage, and heaps of it sometimes.

Think about Joshua in the Bible: for nearly forty years he has been an understudy to the great leader Moses. Now Moses has gone and leadership is thrust fully upon Joshua. Ahead is the Jordan river running at flood peak, and beyond that are the fortified cities of Canaan - the 'Promised Land' that seems so elusive. Talk about change! Joshua has change swirling all around him.

Then into that turmoil, God speaks: "*Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go*" (Joshua 1:9).

So our little mouse couple looks up as their world is crumbling around them. One by one the logs that comprise their home are disappearing, and soon only open sky is above. What will they do?

What do you do? Do you cling to the firewood and risk being crushed by it? Do you cling to the past, to what you know and recognise and risk being burnt? Or do you cling to God's promise to you for a new day? God has promised to be with you wherever you go. God has promised never to leave you or forsake you. What God asks of you is faith to overcome your fear, courage to meet your discouragement and confidence to draw on His strength. He just wants you to trust Him.

The only thing constant in this crazy world is change and if we are to be fruitful and fulfilled and make a difference in the life of others, we have to learn to master change, or change will always be our master. No part of our lives will endure unchanged for very long. But the LORD our God is not of this world and He is unchangeable. God is forever. You can put down your roots into God and that is the only way you can ensure you are never totally uprooted again.

My heart goes out to this trembling mouse couple. I've been where they are, and so have many of you. I hope that after I left them that day they were able to drag their nest into another shelter in the woods to keep dry and warm that winter. I hope that Mr. Mouse finally got over his shock and got with the program. I hope they got to grow older and wiser and were not so traumatised by the change that occurred the day they seemed to lose everything.

Brothers and sisters, when change comes and our lives are disrupted and the familiar is replaced by the unfamiliar: Don't cling to the firewood! So much of what we hold dear in this world will be gone soon. A lot of it may not even matter in ten years, let alone in eternity. Things and people and issues that give you an ulcer today will barely be remembered in the next chapter of your life and will probably be totally irrelevant in the life to come.

Too many of us and those we love and care for are still clinging to yesterday's grand old trees which are today's firewood and tomorrow's memories. We have to move on, start again, every time change comes uninvited, and be thankful for the former chapters and firmly embrace the next chapter, no matter how hard it might feel at the time. No matter how much you wish you could turn back the clock - you can't - not even God can do that.

But a word of warning here: this is an impossible task, and you will remain paralysed and frozen in time like my mouse friend, if you don't have your roots firmly anchored in the unchanging love and grace and power and reality of God. As we shared together recently, we cannot embrace the challenges in this earthly kingdom without our hearts and primary focus being rooted and grounded in the eternal Kingdom of God.

God is the still point in this ever changing world. God is the anchor when the storm comes. God is the rock we stand on when we are overwhelmed in the flood. Only in the eternal, unchanging God can we grow roots into eternity and make some sense of this life on the hard days.

Everything else will pass away - sooner or later. It will all be firewood in someone's trailer and if we cling to the logs of yesterday, if we put our faith in them, if we hang on to what defined our world in a previous chapter of our lives, then we and the ones we care about and have responsibility for will get badly burned and we will lose our focus and our ability to start again and make a real difference in this world.

So what firewood might you be clinging to today which perhaps you hadn't realised until now?

- > Past relationships?
- > Places you once lived?
- > Jobs you once had?
- > Churches you were once part of?
- > Pastors or mentors you were blessed by in the past?
- > Ministries you cherished
- > Songs you used to sing
- > The style of services you once enjoyed?

All memories which flood in at those times when you are struggling to embrace the new chapters in your life. Remembering fondly how things once were in your life is not a bad thing, but wishing you were back there or things could be the way they once were will cripple you and prevent you from seeing what God is doing in this new time in your life. The wind of the Spirit blows where it wills and we cannot direct it, we can only adjust our sails and trust God with the next destination.

A ministry colleague and friend of mine from the USA once shared a childhood story with me which was as profound as it was simple. Some of you have heard me share this before. When he was a young boy, Ken used to holiday at his grandparent's farm and he loved following his grandpa around and doing all the chores and when the chores were done, he always headed for the same place: a huge old pear tree in the paddock next to the house. It was enormous and it was perfect to climb and so young Ken spent hours and hours over many years perched high on a branch in this pear tree pondering his rapidly changing and exciting life.

One day some years later, the unthinkable happened. A huge storm tore through the region and Ken's grand old pear tree was totally uprooted and brought to the ground. His grandfather broke the news to Ken on the phone and he was devastated and convinced his parents to take him out to the farm that weekend.

Ken stood silently with his grandpa as they both looked at this once majestic, magnificent tree which had given them all rich fruit for decades, and Ken a special place to be for his whole childhood, and they both wept. After a long silence, Ken asked, "*So what are we going to do now, Grandpa.*" The wise old man smiled and said carefully, but deliberately, "*We are going to pick the fruit, and burn the rest.*"

Friends, that one statement has stayed with me ever since Ken told me that story, and as each new chapter unfolds in our lives, especially those which might be ushered in through pain, upheaval and heartache, our job is the same as Ken's Grandpa that day on the farm: we too need to pick the fruit, and burn the rest.

We need to celebrate and acknowledge all the great things about that season in our lives and hang on to those memories of the good days and the wonderful people, but we then need to burn everything else: all the disappointments and the pain; all the regrets; all the failures; all that once was standing tall and strong and majestic but now lies dying on the ground. Burn yesterday's props and move on to the next scene in our lives.

The good memories will be with you forever, they are part of the fruit. Ken had tears rolling down his face as he told me about losing his beloved pear tree decades earlier. His memories were strong. The fruit was precious. But, he didn't cling to the firewood. Ken never returned to the place that tree used to be because there was nothing there to return to but a gaping hole and a pile of ashes. He moved on and trusted God for a new tree, a new chapter and a new hope. By God's grace, may you and I do the same as we embrace whatever tomorrow brings.

Let's pray

Gracious Father, I thank you and praise you for those two little mice and the lesson they taught me all those years ago and I pray they have been our teachers again today as they cry out to us in warning and say: "Don't cling to the firewood."

Release in us O Lord, the ability to be thankful for the past whilst intentionally embracing the future and not turning back. Remove those chains which bind our hearts and minds to past hurts, failures, sins, disappointments and unrealised expectations - which serve as a ball and chain around our feet - constantly tripping us as we try to run the race of life.

Remind us every day Lord, that unless You build the house, we labour in vain; unless You are the construction manager of our lives, they will not work as they were meant to and we will not achieve our greatest potential or find the abundance and fulfilment and joy that is our birthright and privilege - and Your heart's desire for each of us.

Lord God, give us steadfast hearts that cannot be dragged down by false loves; give us courageous hearts that cannot be worn down by trouble; give us righteous hearts that cannot be side-tracked by unholy or unworthy goals. Give to us also, our Lord and God, understanding to know You, diligence to look to You, wisdom to recognise You and a faithfulness that will bring us one day to see You face to face. Amen.