



Who's in Charge?

Come now, you who say,
"Today or tomorrow we will
go to such and such a city,
and spend a year there and
engage in business and make
a profit." Yet you do not know
what your life will be like
tomorrow. You are just a vapor
that appears for a little while
and then vanishes away.

(James 4:13-14)

WE WERE STILL WITHIN THE SHORES OF THE PLACID BAY,
and the ship was moving so slowly that I imagined it might take
days for us just to clear the final buoy. Yet already my stomach
was rolling about and the bones in my legs were turning to
gelatin. Suddenly this huge ship—a bulwark of steel seemingly
as immovable as the pier to which it had been secured—was
bobbing and swaying beneath my feet, offering little support for
my quivering constitution.

It was the very, very beginning of my six months in the vicinity of Vietnam, and the small-town, heretofore landlocked boy from Iowa was getting his first taste of the sea. The first quivering moments notwithstanding, after about a week's time, I had gained my "sea legs" and was moving about the ship with the unfaltering step of the old salt I was fast becoming.

Then the *real* waves hit.

One night I dreamed I was clinging to the very tip of the mast. As the ship (in my dream) would roll to one side, I would reach down and touch the water on that side of the ship, then, as the ship would roll back, I would reach down and touch the water on the other. I awoke to the sounds of unsecured furniture sliding across the floor and crashing into bulkheads. Suddenly everything in my world was being tossed about like furnishings in an upended dollhouse. I awoke to the disturbing truth that my dream had been based on the reality of my surroundings—and that old, familiar quivering began again in my belly.

Years later, while living in San Diego, I was at work at my desk when, from out of the east, I felt the earth rumbling toward me. This was not like the vibration caused by a passing truck, or even the pounding iron wheels of a diesel locomotive. No, this was the earth itself rolling as if it were a subterranean steamroller, huffing and puffing toward me. The rolling approached from out of the distance—the earth quivered and shook like a huge carpet that someone had grasped from the other end and given a good snap. The rolling wave passed beneath my feet and the cement foundation of our house, then rolled on into the opposite distance.

But Dust

Every so often we are reminded that we are not in charge. Every so often the earth will not just roll past, beneath our feet, but will give a mighty heave like something released from confinement, like a huge beast rousing to claim its freedom. Every so often fire will not be extinguished, but will take on a life of its own, consuming trees and homes and any life left standing helplessly in its path. Every so often the waves and wind will mount up and come crashing through everything in their path, leaving behind ruin, and filth, and angry despair.

At such times the seemingly substantial trappings of civilization become laughably insubstantial. Fires and explosions, heaving and buckling roadways, collapsing buildings, inundation of biblical proportions—all are consumed as if made from little more than papier-mache, making a joke of man's impertinence.

At such times we are reminded of an important biblical concept: dust.

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.
"By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return."
(Genesis 2:7,3:19)

And now, once again, down in the states bordering the Gulf coast of the United States we have been reminded that we are but dust. There is little man can do against the epochal onslaught of a hurricane's angry might. Flooding will occur, buildings will crumble and fall, people will die. Even man's calculated defenses seem trivial and inept against such an awful strength.

Allegiance

Just as a father has compassion on his children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.
For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are but dust.

(Psalm 103:13-14)

I unapologetically love my country. I am a patriot. When anger and unhinged hatred for the United States is spewed from the lips of those without (and, sadly, from a few within), I take it personally. I am wounded by their ignorance-based vitriol. I love my country.

But I love God more, and God says that He rules over everything that is—even wealthy, powerful nations such as mine.

For the kingdom is the Lord's
And He rules over the nations.
All the prosperous of the earth will eat and worship,
All those who go down to the dust will bow before Him,
Even he who cannot keep his soul alive.
Posterity will serve Him;
It will be told of the Lord to the coming generation.
They will come and will declare His righteousness
To a people who will be born, that He has performed it.
(Psalm 22:28-31)

Man has become accustomed to thinking of himself as the highest form of life. We imagine we are masters of our universe—masters of everything we see. We can do what we want, build where we want, take what we want; we answer to no one and apologize for nothing. The present mindset eliminates the need, or desire, to answer to an all-powerful God. But in our arrogance we have forgotten that we are "but dust."

On the surface of this globe we are little more than ants, and to God in His heaven we are little more than dust motes. That is not to say that we are unimportant to Him; God has set us higher even than the angels, granted us dominion over the beasts of the field, granted us the privilege to become brothers and sisters, fellow heirs with Christ. But none of these benefits set us higher than Him. Man creates

his own sorrow when he forgets that he is not the one in charge. God *will* rule. *He* is the one in charge.

Even while we are rescuing the perishing, and housing those who are now without home; while we drain away the unwelcome waters; while we remove the miles of debris and ruin and begin the long and expensive task of rebuilding the lives and businesses of those who have been displaced—even *while* we address the physical needs, we must address the spiritual. We must pause in our flurry of activity to ask, "What is God telling me in this? What does my sovereign Master want me to learn from this experience?"

The answers may be different for each person—but the answers are there. For the Lord does not waste such trials. They are as much a part of His will as the life-bringing spring rains that water the fields of grain. He is as much their author as He is the author of the breeze that gently cools the fevered brow of the worker.

He is God.
He is in charge.

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