

## **Character – God’s Buffer Against the Earthquakes of Life**

### **Psalm 15 (New International Version)**

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbour no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, who despises a vile man, but honours those who fear the LORD, who keeps his oath, even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.

As I write this article, the people of Indonesia and Samoa are picking up the pieces following a series of earthquakes and a tsunami that have left untold thousands of people dead and thousands more injured. Truly tragic. It seems there was no escape for those affected. Without warning, buildings collapsed in Indonesia and a wall of water flattened villages in the Pacific.

### **A Great Shaking**

There is a great shaking going on today. It is affecting the foundations of lives of millions of men in this country alone. Sadly many will crumble.

I have lived in earthquake zones. I was once posted to Lima, Peru, in the wake of a massive earthquake that left more than 70,000 dead. I frequently felt the (cracked) building in which I lived shake as the earth beneath was jolted by tremors – we always hoped that the shaking was not another “big one”. When the shaking started there was nowhere to go; nowhere to hide. In the worst earthquakes, people perished in their thousands.

There are “tremors” that face each of us today. The foundations we place under our structures so we can be strong, unshakable and unmovable in the face of the realities of everyday life. It all gets back to character. Our identities are not our work, reputation, assets, achievements, though there is no denying these, but who are as men when everything else stripped away. It is our character that will determine whether we stand or collapse when the world around us starts shaking.

### **Character Defined**

I looked in the dictionary/internet for a definition of “character”. However, I was not satisfied with what I found. I discovered one site called “How to customize your character.” How ironic.

Character may be hard to define, but we all recognize character when we see it. Billy Graham once said that the mark of a true Christian is someone who is not afraid to give his or her parrot to the town gossip (parrots repeat the language of their owners). Ronald Reagan used to say that “You can tell a lot about a fellow’s character by his ways of eating jelly beans.” One at a time, one colour only, or a whole handful. Reagan was always assessing what made up those he met. God also looks at our character.

Whether you and I grow in relationship with Him, and enjoy his blessing, fulfillment, direction in our lives, or remain afar off, depends not on what we have done, nor what pretend to be, but our character.

Writer W Somerset Maugham once said, “Sometimes people carry to such perfection the mask they have assumed that in due course they actually become the person they seem.” (*The Moon and Sixpence*, p. 147). What kind of mask are you wearing?

## **Things That Shake People**

### **Economic Tremors**

We have been taught that financial success is the litmus test of how well we have done. We have made money a centerpiece of our identity, our wealth has become a measure of how well we have used our lives. The Global Economic Crisis is shaking that foundation. As a result of the global meltdown, job insecurity is back in the headlines, bankruptcies are up, and even the divorce rate is up. According to Dr Ken Henry, the Secretary of the Australian Treasury, our individual net worth down around \$A25,000 compared with a year ago. We all face pressures in the area of finances. Financial disagreement and stresses are bigger contributors to marriage break-up than sex, mothers in law or socks left on the floor. Economic strength cannot be the primary strength of our lives.

### **Moral Tremors**

Many have followed the fall of former Justice Marcus Einfeld, a respected Australian judge, Queen’s Council, UNICEF Ambassador for Children, Member of Order of Australia; and winner of other prestigious awards. He lost it all and is in jail today because he repeatedly lied in court, attempted to pervert the course of justice, all to save \$75. The problem was that his inner moral foundations were weak, in spite of his position and all he represented. When push came to shove, his moral fibre was weak and the walls caved in. He lied and covered up; now his reputation is in tatters. The issue wasn’t about \$75, but a lack of moral foundation.

Not a day goes by when the media doesn’t feature some famous Alpha Male in moral crisis. Consider the recent marriage collapses of Mel Gibson and Greg Norman. Or Matthew Johns, former football player for the Cronulla Sharks in Australia; his reputation took a hammering because he could not remain morally upright. Henry Kissinger once quipped that “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac”. The reality is that we are all vulnerable to moral tremors, whether sexual temptation, what we watch on TV or PC when no one else is around. The Bible teaches that we are all created with sexual needs – with responsibility.

Jesus called his age an “evil and adulterous generation”; I wonder what He would call this one. The airwaves around us are filled with moral temptations waiting to get our attention when we turn the TV on. Now, there is nothing wrong with watching TV, but we need inner strength to stand firm when what we should not be watching comes on, the ground starts shaking and the heart starts thumping.

## **Relationship Tremors**

In my experience many Australian men find it chronically difficult to make friendships. According to Relationships Australia (the primary, Government-funded, relationship agency in the country) the current economic crisis is pushing many relationships over the edge. We find it hard to be all things to all people, especially when we are surrounded by disfunctionality, gossip, slander and negativity. We need inner strength to be men among men, women among women, strong among those who consider themselves better than us, to stand firm when others feel wobbly, not to judge them, but to reach out hand and hold them.

## **Health Tremors**

An advertisement in the margin of my Facebook home page promotes “A job that matters for over 40s – be a personal trainer.” When we are growing up we feel immortal. Richard Pratt, the 4<sup>th</sup> richest man in Australia died a few months ago of prostate cancer. I once had dinner with Pratt, I was awestruck. He was so rich, so powerful, and so successful. But he died nevertheless. In the opulent West health pressures are acute. Breast and bowel cancer. Heart disease. Type 2 Diabetes. Renal failure. No one wants to talk about men’s health. My father used to avoid visiting the doctor, “just in case”. My brother ignored warning signs and died of a melanoma at the age of 27. Men still die much younger than women (7 years young, on average, in Australia). Mental health remains one of the greatest dangers facing young men. Suicide is still a threat. The Bible teaches that physical health is often relation to spiritual health.

## **Identity Tremors**

A grave stone says, “Here lies Jack. He died and 20 and stopped breathing at 80”.

There comes a time when our dreams do not work out, when we walk the streets at night wondering what life is all about, and we feel disillusioned. We take those questions and insecurities into our relations and are disappointed when our husbands, wives, girlfriends and best friends are unable to meet them and give us purpose. When the crowd has gone home, when we are lying in bed and our partner is asleep, when the questions about who we are, why here and whether life has meaning come to haunt us. We all have needs and struggles. Modern men and women are often too embarrassed to share their concerns and feelings with others, or they feel what they are going through is pointless. So they count sheep and watch the luminescent hands of the clock go round and round, convinced that time is running out. “Have I made a name? What’s in a name anyway?” Go to cemeteries, and you will quickly realize who cares about John Smith or Dane Doe. Mostly they are forgotten.

There are many things that shake modern men ad women. They can be “tipping points” that push people over the edge, so to speak. They are real. They can be deadly. It is often hard for us to admit them. They sometimes occur because of poor choices. Often they are beyond our control.

## **Spiritual Tremors**

We all have spiritual needs and hungers. The Bible teaches that we are made in the image of God, designed for relationship with Him. There is part of us only He can fill. In my experience, the key to managing economic, moral, relationship, identity, even health tremors, which are all real, that threaten to shake us, is our relationship with God. He is a rock. He is stable, unchangeable, firm, a shelter. He can show us how to live:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8).*

The key questions are: how can I walk with God, please Him, experience His leading and blessing? How can I go away and be different? How can I have stability in my life as a man, husband, woman, girlfriend? The Bible talks about people who are “friends of God”. How can you or I become friends of God, build strong character, make right decisions and be men or women who can stand when ground around us starts to move.

### **What Kind of Person Becomes A Friend of God?**

So, the key issue is not “what sort of person has a charmed existence, whether everything they touch turns to gold, their muscles never weaken, they are the envy of others; not even whether they get a nice obituary when they die. This is not about reputation. Jesus made Himself of “no reputation” when He put aside everything and came into the world (Philippians 2:5-11). It is not about putting on a front, a façade, for the passing parade. We are not here to live someone else’s personality, dream, or ambition, but to be changed and fulfilled as we live in the presence of God.

### **Applying the Text**

Psalm 15 describes what God is like. It reflects our values as Christians, our priorities, what make us distinctive. God is saying, in effect, “I want you to live like this, your moral charter, your performance indicators:

*Walk straight, act right, tell the truth, don't run others down, don't hurt others, don't get into habit of blaming others, don't hang out with those who have poor morals, keep your word, even when costs you, make an honest living, honour those who fear God. Make him your goal.*

If you will live like this, you will be the ideal husband, boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife. The ideal role model for your family and friends. The ideal boss, business partner or employee. The ideal parent, friend or leader.

Maybe you need to need repent of bad choices, wrong attitudes or poor priorities, but it is never too late to start living like this. He can restore you, give strength from this moment on.

It all gets down to character. Not what you look like on outside, but who you are on the inside, the "real" you. With God’s help, you can start living the Psalm 15 way today, so that when the tremors come they won’t shake you.