

Ashes *into* Gold

The Journey of Spirituality

Martin M. Davis

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TO SARA

Table of Contents



A Personal Note from the Author	11
Preface.....	15
Acknowledgments	17
Introduction.....	21
Chapter 1: Descent into Ashes	29
A Universal Human Drama.....	29
Many Roads Lead Down.....	30
Rising from the Ashes.....	32
Rooted in Ashes	33
A Caveat	34
Contemporary Illustrations	35
Bill Wilson	36
Charles Colson.....	37
In Summary	39
Chapter 2: Down in Egypt	41
Into the Ashes of Slavery	42
The Cry of the Broken and the Powerless.....	44
Darkest Before Dawn	46

A Power Greater than Themselves	46
Discouragement, Doubt, and Disappointment	48
The Way Down Is the Way Up.....	50
Looking Ahead.....	52
Chapter 3: Escape to Freedom.....	53
The Nature of the Journey	54
The Dragon of Fear.....	54
Familiar Misery and the Fear of Change	56
Uncharted Territory.....	61
The Shield of Faith.....	62
No Easier, Softer Way.....	64
Chapter 4: Into the Wilderness	69
Longing for Egypt	70
One Day at a Time.....	72
More than Bread Alone	73
Worry: Borrowing Tomorrow's Troubles Today.....	75
Worry and the Illusion of Control.....	78
Trust: The Antidote to Worry.....	79
Faith Plus Action Equals Trust.....	80
Chapter 5: Pitfalls in the Path	83
An Idol of Gold.....	84
Modern Idolatry.....	85
The Dragon of Desire	86
Filling in the Blank.....	87
Money: A Rival God	88
The Tyranny of Things.....	89
The Rich Young Man.....	92
Relationships: Misplaced Longing	96

Relationships and Desire	96
Beyond Relationships	97
Power: The Illusion of Control.....	99
The Kingdom Use of Power	100
Phantom Deities	101
 Chapter 6: Surrender: Letting Go and Letting God.....	103
Whoever Is for the LORD.....	103
Letting Go and Letting God.....	105
Renunciation.....	106
Letting Go of Outcomes	108
Today's Desires, Tomorrow's Outcomes	109
No Concern for the Harvest.....	111
Letting Go of Self-Sufficiency	114
Surrender of Self.....	119
His Majesty the Baby	120
A Change of Command	120
Death Before Life.....	122
A Word of Caution	123
In Summary	124
 Chapter 7: Living in the Wilderness	127
A Familiar Refrain	127
Still Spiritual Children	129
Wrestling with God.....	131
Heeding the Call	133
Abraham, Father of the Faithful	135
A Modern Pilgrim	137
The Back Parts of God	139
Feeling Forsaken.....	142
The Way of the Cross.....	143
Not Around, but Through	145

The Transforming Power of God's Love.....	145
Notes	149

A Personal Note from the



Writing this book has been a long and difficult process. Not because the words were difficult to put on paper, although that is always hard enough, but because the *living* of what is written in this book has been difficult. Years ago, my friend and fellow therapist Ken Gilburth warned me: “Be careful what you write; you will have to live it.” He was right!

I began to formulate the ideas for this book at a time when I thought I understood the journey that we will come to know in the pages to follow as *the journey of spirituality* through the wilderness of change and growth. To be sure, at that time I had indeed learned much about the journey through reading, formal education, and more than forty years of personal experience, and I was able to communicate many truths about the journey not only in writing, but also in counseling and conducting seminars. Furthermore, I had learned much about wandering in the wilderness of change and growth from the many clients I had been privileged to work with in my years as a therapist, both in private practice and with the counseling ministry of a large evangelical Christian church.

Nevertheless, God intended for me to personally live out

Ashes into Gold

what is written in this book, at a level I had never before experienced. In one memorable summer, God began to address me directly in “big dreams,” as Carl Jung described those dreams that portend significant events in our lives, and in repeated encounters with others—sometimes total strangers—who took me by the arm and assured (warned?) me that the Holy Spirit was about to work in my life. Now, years later, I can fully appreciate the words in the New Testament that warn: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

Shortly after my dreams and encounters with those messengers of God, I separated from my wife, and, at my insistence—as well as my deep regret—we subsequently divorced (by the grace of God, we are now remarried). Quite unintentionally, and not in the least in accordance with my plans, I then began a deep descent into ashes that led me to the depths of clinical depression and utter despair. I experienced fear, anxiety, and an overwhelming sense of loneliness unlike anything I had ever experienced, even in those days, years ago, when I struggled with addiction to alcohol. To make matters worse, within a few months my mother died, and I experienced the loss not only of a parent, but of a true friend. By then, I was truly wandering in the wilderness—and was thoroughly lost. To ease the incredible pain I felt, I sought security and meaning in relationships, and invested in others much energy that would have been better given to God. I learned how easily we make idols of relationships; I also learned what poor substitutes they are for a relationship with God. During my continued wandering in the wilderness, I studied Zen for several years and found much of value there. I met many wonderful people through that experience, many of whom were burnt out Christians who, in some sense, had been let down by the version of the faith they had been taught. I finally realized, however, that, at least for me, Zen was a dead end. Whereas Zen offered karma, Christianity offered grace, and I was sorely in need of the latter. I tried liberal Christianity, but soon learned

A Personal Note from the Author

that without the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and a literal—yes, it really happened!—Resurrection, there really wasn't much left that could be called Christianity. With the help of C.S. Lewis, I realized I needed my Christianity full strength, not the insipid, watered-down version offered by far too many churches today. Finally, after many years in the wilderness, wrestling with God, I returned to my conservative, evangelical Christian roots and renewed my relationship with the loving Father who had been waiting for me all along with open arms. I also renewed my relationship with the only woman who has ever loved me unconditionally: my wife, Sara.

Today, I am beginning to learn what it is like to live in the promised land. I do not intend to imply, however, that all my difficulties are behind me, for living in the promised land, like living in the wilderness, also poses its challenges, difficulties, and peculiar encounters with God. Nor do I intend to portray myself as an expert on the journey of spirituality; I know better! But I have learned a little, and I hope to share some of that learning with you.

So I do not write as an expert, but as a fellow traveler on the journey of spirituality. To be sure, there are few experts on this subject (although some of the great saints may qualify as experts, though they would never say so). I believe that, in light of eternity and the greatness of God, we are all really just beginners on the spiritual path.

Therefore, the book you are reading today is very different from the book I started—and thought I had finished—years ago. My thoughts and ideas have been tempered and refined in the heat of the wilderness experience, and much of the original text of this book has been revised. What I once knew through formal education, reading, personal experience, and the experiences of others, I have now learned through deeper and more painful first-hand experience. Today, I do not claim to be a better man, only a deeper one.

Ashes into Gold

In addition, I believe that much of what is written here is sorely needed in the marketplace of ideas that has become the big business of Christian publishing. A relationship with God is not all light and victory (although it will culminate in that one day). As we shall see in the pages to follow, a relationship with God has many varied aspects: some wonderful, delightful, and pleasant; others painful, difficult, and even frightening. Much has been written about the more pleasant aspects of a relationship with God, and that is as it should be; for we are made for relationship with our Creator, and our greatest fulfillment, both now and in the life to come, is nurtured in that relationship. Nevertheless, there are also difficulties in a relationship with God, and I have not glossed over them in this book. To be sure, the journey of spirituality is not always a leisurely stroll atop the sun-lit peaks of spiritual experience, but is sometimes a grinding, slogging ordeal trod step by trudging step through the muddy lowlands of the spiritual valley.

In conclusion: Now that you know something of my journey through the wilderness of change and growth, you may rest assured that when I describe the pain of those who are drowning deep within the well of desperation, I know whereof I speak. You may also rest assured that when I say God will turn *your* ashes into gold, I also know whereof I speak. First, however, it is your worthy task to accept his invitation to join him in the wilderness of change and growth and therein be transformed by the living God.

If you find yourself in the ash pile of life, I trust that this book will offer you encouragement and hope. Believe it or not, there is a way out of the ashes, though not an easy one. There is hope, though it can be difficult to see in the darkness. You are invited to enter the wilderness of change and growth, wherein you may encounter God. I assure you, there is a promised land, and God will guide you to it. But first, there is the wilderness.

Preface



The book you are about to read describes a journey, one that each of us, at some point in our lives, is called to undertake. We will come to know the journey described in the pages to follow as *the journey of spirituality*, a difficult pilgrimage that takes us through the wilderness of change and growth.

As we shall see, the journey of spirituality often begins in the ash pile of life, that painful place of descent wherein we may find ourselves after we have undergone a major life-changing event. That event may be divorce, the loss of a job or career, the loss of a loved one, or the discovery of a terminal illness. Or we may descend into ashes as a result of ongoing events or circumstances that have come to characterize our lives. Those who are overwhelmed by addiction, held captive in abusive relationships, trapped in meaningless jobs or careers, or who suffer debilitating illnesses are invited to enter the wilderness of change and growth and therein encounter God. In short, this book is for all whose hopes, dreams, and plans lie in ashes at their feet.

The journey of spirituality in the wilderness of change and growth is one that leads from pain and brokenness to

Ashes into Gold

psychological, emotional, and spiritual wholeness. Therefore, whether you have yet to begin your journey, or have been traveling for some time, this book is for you.

In the pages to come, you are invited to follow the path of others who have embarked on the journey of spirituality, and from their experiences you may learn what lies ahead as you embark on your journey.

Moreover, you will have the opportunity to explore spirituality at great length. Rather than an otherworldly state that one seeks to attain, spirituality is herein understood as a *process* of psychological, emotional, and spiritual growth. This process is described in this book as the journey of spirituality through the wilderness of change and growth. The spiritual principles outlined in this book are for everyone, because all of us—whether we choose to heed the call or not—are invited to enter the wilderness of change and growth, wherein we may encounter God.

While this book is written from a Christian perspective, the spiritual principles addressed herein are universal and apply to those who practice other traditions, for the Holy Bible—God’s word in written form—speaks eloquently to the human condition in all places and times. Furthermore, the principles described herein, as well as much of the language used, will be intimately familiar to those who participate in Twelve Step programs or other self-help groups that have a spiritual foundation. Familiar concepts such as faith and surrender are discussed at length, for the spiritual journey of change and growth necessarily entails faith in, as well as surrender to, a higher power. For me, the true higher power, and the one who guides my own spiritual journey, is Jesus Christ.

I invite all of you who have experienced the ashes of life to embark upon the journey of spirituality through the wilderness of change and growth. On the other side of that place of trial, testing, and transformation, you will find waiting the promised land flowing with milk and honey.

Acknowledgments



Anyone who spends a few years wandering through the wilderness of change and growth is bound to meet a few interesting characters along the way. In fact, the great stories and myths assure us that, at the various crossroads on our journeys, helpers will appear to point us in the right direction and, perhaps, even walk a little way with us.

One of those helpers on my journey has been my friend and fellow therapist Ken Gilburth. Ken acted as a guide during the early days of my wandering through the wilderness of change and growth. Ken helped me to understand that the events and problems of our lives are not the meaningless, mundane occurrences of what some call ordinary existence—or worse, quiet desperation—but are, in fact, the replaying of great stories that embody universal truths. Without Ken Gilburth, this book could never have been written. My respect and appreciation for him is evidenced by my quoting him several times in the pages to follow.

Another helper who guided me a little further on the journey of spirituality is Clare Van Lent, the director of the Dwelling Place, a Franciscan prayer center in my state. To me, Clare is the embodiment of the life of faith, for she demonstrates in her daily

Ashes into Gold

life what it means to live by faith, not by sight. While there are many who talk the talk, Clare is one who walks the walk. Her guidance and counsel helped me through some difficult places on the path. We will meet Clare again in the pages to come.

There are many others who have taught me much about life in the wilderness of change and growth. They have shared their stories with me in the therapist's office. I refer to the clients I have been privileged to serve in my years as a therapist, both in private practice and with the counseling ministry of a large evangelical Christian church. Much of what has been written in this book is simply what I have learned from them. Some of them appear, incognito, in the pages to follow. I have great respect for those who are willing to struggle and grow through the counseling process. What great courage they have! From having sat in both chairs, I know how easy it is to be the therapist, and how difficult it is to be the client.

I would like to thank Ron Halvorson of RPI Publishing, Inc. Ron provided the impetus that enabled me to finally finish writing this book. Ron also read the final manuscript and encouraged me to continue this project. He also offered valuable insights that allowed me to clarify certain aspects of the text as they relate to the journey of spirituality.

Moreover, I would like to acknowledge members of my own family who have played a part in the writing and publishing of this book. First, I would like to acknowledge my parents, both of whom have passed away in recent years. Their passing has been part of my struggle in the wilderness. My mother, Billie, and my father, Martin Sr., would both be very pleased to see this book in print and to know that one of their five children had written it.

I would also like to acknowledge Ken and Hilda Courtney. One of the more joyous aspects of my journey in recent years has been the restoration of my relationship with Ken and my sister Hilda, after we had drifted apart for many years. I have

Acknowledgments

gained much understanding about the beauty and wisdom of God's design for the family by watching and learning from Ken and Hilda as they relate to their children and grandchildren. Ken is a man whose life is founded upon a deep and abiding love of God. I have never known a man who, I believe, loves God more than does Ken Courtney. His mansion in heaven will be a large one. Ken was one of the first to read the final manuscript of this book. His enthusiastic response to the message contained in these pages was evidenced by his desire to participate in the publishing of this work. Because of his belief in the ministry this book could bring to those who need it, Ken, along with his wife Hilda, made the publishing of this book possible.

Finally, and far from least, I must acknowledge and thank my wife, Sara. She has unfailingly believed in me and stood by me for more than twenty years, even during a painful time when I was far from her. In order for me to have the time to write and complete the assignments God has given me, sacrifices have been necessary. While it is one thing for me to make sacrifices in order to accomplish what I believe God has called me to do, it is quite another to ask someone else to sacrifice alongside me. Yet, Sara has been willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary for our writing ministry to become a reality. My journey has taught me that a woman like Sara is a rare treasure. As the book of Proverbs states: "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies" (Prov. 31:10). To be sure, it is a rare and uncommon privilege for a man to be loved unconditionally; yet Sara, who knows me better than anyone ever has, loves me unconditionally. Because of her unending faith and support, as well as her willingness to accept, without complaint, my crazy way of life, I gratefully dedicate this book to her.

—Martin M. Davis
Jackson, Mississippi
Spring, 2004

Introduction



O *NCE UPON A TIME* there was a soldier, a bright young officer, who stood proudly at attention in his shiny-buttoned uniform, a colorful plume in his tall officer's hat. The gallant young lieutenant served an ambitious king who sought many lands to rule; thus, the future was bright for soldiers.

One day, the ambitious king died, and a new, peace-loving king took the throne of the land; hence, there was no longer any need for soldiers. Therefore, the shiny young officer was discharged from the army. Because he had no craft but soldiering, he quickly became poor and hungry. Broken and in despair, he went into a deep, dark forest.

Deep in the woods, the soldier met a wrinkled old man—the devil. “Why are you wandering alone in the forest, poor and destitute?” asked the devil. The soldier replied, “I have recently been discharged from the army, and I have no craft but soldiering.” The devil laughed cunningly and said, “Then come with me, and I will give you work.” The soldier happily agreed. “But,” said the devil with an ominous tone in his voice, “I warn you: You must serve me for seven years, and during that time you

Ashes into Gold

may not cut your hair, shave your beard, or trim your nails. At the end of seven years, I will pay you in full.” The soldier did not like the bargain at all, but because he was poor, hungry, and destitute, he agreed to the devil’s harsh terms. Then, the devil took the soldier into a dark cave, wherein they descended a deep stairway to hell.

The soldier was assigned the task of tending the fires beneath the cauldrons where the souls of the damned were boiling. At first the work was hot and difficult in the dimly lit surroundings, but soon the soldier took to it readily enough. Much of his time was spent shoveling away the ashes that quickly accumulated around the cauldrons from the great amount of wood the fires required. The time passed quickly for the soldier, so that when his seven years were finished, he felt as though he had been in hell only half a year.

At the end of the seven years, the devil came to release the soldier from his servitude, as had been agreed. As the soldier prepared to leave hell, he asked the devil for his wages. To the soldier’s dismay, the devil paid him with seven bags full of ashes—the same ashes the soldier had shoveled for seven years. The soldier was disheartened and deeply disappointed to end up with nothing but ashes; but having no power over the devil, he accepted his wages and, step by trudging step, climbed the stairway that ascended from hell.

When he came into the sunshine, the soldier was saddened to see his uniform soiled, tattered, and torn, its buttons tarnished with age. He realized how grimy he had become from his years of shoveling ashes and tending the fires of hell. He longed for a bath, for he was weary of the dirty ashes that covered his skin. Also, he wanted to trim his hair, beard, and nails and rest on a clean, soft bed. So he journeyed forth, even though he did not know where he was going.

Only a short way into his journey, the tattered soldier came upon a stream that bordered a dark and mysterious forest.

Introduction

Because the brook was swollen with the melting snow of early spring, he could see no way across. Thus, he put down his bags of ashes, removed his knapsack from across his shoulder, and sat down upon a mossy log to rest.

As he tarried by the swirling stream, the soldier grew uneasy because he heard strange and frightening sounds coming from the forest beyond. In addition, he began to think of the danger he risked if he tried to ford the heavily swollen stream; he feared he would be washed away and drowned. As he grew more fearful at the prospects of continuing his journey, he began to regret having come to such a mysterious place; he even thought of returning to hell, for though the work there was hot and dirty, at least the surroundings were familiar, unlike this strange place full of danger and frightening noises. He determined not to go back, however, for he knew that no matter how much he labored in hell, he would only receive more ashes.

As the soldier sat upon the log, pondering what to do, his thoughts wandered back to the childhood prayers his mother taught him years before in the nursery of their small cottage in a distant valley. Then he remembered the wise words of his grandfather, who taught him that Providence never failed to lend a helping hand to those who asked. Thus, with some discomfort because of his lack of practice, the soldier removed his crumpled hat, cleared his throat, and quietly voiced a simple prayer to the heavens, asking for deliverance from the impasse that faced him.

After a humble amen, the soldier gathered his courage, arose, and surveyed the stream's swirling currents. Suddenly, he felt the wind rise as it rushed past his face and lifted the hair from his shoulders. He noticed the branches in the trees beginning to wave and heard the leaves swirling and cartwheeling across the ground as the wind grew stronger. Then he heard the cracking and creaking of a huge dead oak that broke from the top and fell crashing to the ground, bridging the stream not far from where

Ashes into Gold

he stood. With great apprehension, the soldier moved closer and surveyed the sight before him. Because the tree was severely decayed, the soldier was not certain the trunk would support his weight as he walked upon it. Nevertheless, since there was no other way across the swollen stream, he offered a simple prayer of faith to the heavens and set foot upon the rotting trunk. As he hurried safely to the far side of the brook, the decayed oak sagged in the middle, then groaned as it broke in half and tumbled into the water below. With a trembling hand, the soldier wiped his brow as he looked heavenward and breathed a sigh of gratitude for his safe passage across the roaring stream. Then he made his way into the mysterious, dark forest.

As the soldier entered the forest, he used his rusty old sword to clear the brush and heavy undergrowth from his path, for these woods were strange and rarely explored, and there was no clearly defined trail. Because the journey was difficult, he soon grew weary with hunger. As he felt inside one pocket of his coat and then another, he was saddened to learn that he had no more food. When he had left hell, he had taken only the bags of ashes and a small knapsack in which there was little room for food as well as the few belongings he had salvaged. As the ache in his stomach worsened, he began to think of his days in hell. He remembered the warm bowl of soup he received each evening at the end of a long day of labor. As the hunger gnawed deep inside, he longed to sit by the cauldrons eating his soup, for surely that was better than the aching that tormented him now. Growing weaker with each step, the soldier feared that his journey was soon to end, for he could not last much longer without food.

As he continued to trudge through the forest, the soldier suddenly noticed a strange bush ahead, one covered with magic berries. Gaining strength at the sight, he hurried to the bush bedecked with the enchanting, deeply colored fruit. Then, he picked some of the berries and tasted them. To his delight, he found they were delicious, and so he ate until he was full. After

Introduction

eating as much as he could hold, the soldier removed his knapsack from across his shoulder so that he could fill it with berries to take with him as he traveled on. To his surprise, however, there were no more berries on the bush; there had been only enough to fill him up. Nevertheless, having regained both his strength and his hope, the soldier determined to continue his journey, praying that he would find another bush covered with magic berries in the forest ahead.

The soldier spent many days wandering through the forest. At first he had been able to keep track of the passing days by making a scratch on a small piece of rawhide that hung from his knapsack, one mark for each day in the forest. Yet the rawhide had long since become covered with scratches, and the soldier had lost count of the number of days he had journeyed from hell. Oftentimes, the soldier yearned to be free of the dark woods in which he had traveled for so long, for there were always frightening beasts about, and the work of hacking his way through the forest was often difficult. In the winter, when the snow covered the ground and he shook with cold, the soldier longed to sip a cup of hot tea and sit by the hearth before a warm fire. At other times, he longed for a feather bed to rest upon, one piled high with layers of warm quilts to insulate him from the cold. When he dwelled upon those things he lacked in the forest, he would think of returning to hell, for at least it was warm by the cauldrons, and there was always hot soup to eat at the end of a long day. Nevertheless, as he rubbed the thick calluses that had grown upon his hands from years of shoveling ashes in hell, the grimy soldier determined to go forward, for he felt himself being gently drawn onward, and he could not help but believe that something better lay ahead than the hell he had left behind.

One day, the soldier stopped to lean against a tree so he could remove his boots and rub his feet as they had begun to ache from the many miles he had walked that day. As he rubbed the sores and calluses on his tired feet, he began to think of

Ashes into Gold

the many days he had wandered in the forest and how he had often yearned to be free of these deep woods. With a sigh and a nod, he realized that his complaining about the ever-present underbrush as well as his yearning to escape the forest had done him no good; it had only made his journey more difficult. As his realization deepened, he began to understand that, instead of flowing with the currents of life, he was fighting against them and, thereby, creating a hell almost as real as the one he had left behind. Closing his eyes and bowing his head with an attitude of humble acceptance, he solemnly pledged to trust his path to the wisdom of the divine Providence his grandfather had told him about many years before.

As the days came and went, the soldier began to notice with amused delight that his life seemed different since he had decided to let go of his own will and intentions and trust his life to the heavens. Nowadays, when his vision was especially clear, the forest seemed almost like a home to him, for he loved the sight of the graceful, bounding deer and the laughter of the misty waterfalls hidden in green, mossy hollows, blessings his time in the wilderness was teaching him to notice and treasure. And though he sometimes grew lonely, he had the lovely mountain laurel and the many-colored meadow flowers to brighten his way. Even more, he was especially grateful that he had never grown hungry in the forest since he had first discovered the bush covered with magic berries; for each day since, he had stumbled upon another bush whose fruit sustained him for another day. As he reflected upon many things, the soldier thanked the heavens for the many gifts the forest offered, and he realized that, even in this place, he had learned much about peace and contentment.

One day, at a time when he no longer thought so often about leaving the forest, the soldier's path opened into the bright sunshine, and suddenly he could see for miles in many directions. Then he spotted a secluded inn nestled high in an alpine

Introduction

meadow. He made his way through sweet grass laced with the blue, yellow, pink, and white wild flowers of late summer and drew near the strangely peaceful dwelling. As his eyes scanned the lovely gardens that surrounded the inn, he was delighted by the fragrant scents that filled the air, borne by the gentle breezes that wafted across the many varieties of roses that grew there. Strange trees and unusual shrubs stood in the garden and added a sense of mystery to the paradisiacal setting. Because he knew nothing of this unusual place, the soldier removed his crumpled hat and, with lowly demeanor, slowly walked inside, his long coarse hair tumbling about his shoulders.

Upon entering the inn, the soldier spotted the innkeeper who was humming cheerfully as he polished the heavy oak desk on which the guest register lay. The ashy, grimy soldier, hat in hand, approached the innkeeper, cleared his throat, and humbly asked for a room and a bath. The innkeeper greeted him kindly and extended a callused, scarred hand in welcome. Suddenly, the soldier realized he had no money or nothing of value to offer his host; all he possessed for his seven years of labor in hell were seven bags full of ashes. The innkeeper noticed the worried, weary look in the soldier's eyes. "What troubles you, pilgrim?" he asked. The soldier replied, "I have nothing with which to pay for my room and bath." The innkeeper smiled knowingly at the haggard, tired traveler and said with a wink, "Reach your hand into one of the bags you carry." Not understanding, but not knowing what else to do, the soldier reached his hand into one of the bags. Much to his surprise, he discovered that his ashes had turned into gold.

CHAPTER 1

Descent into Ashes



But those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction.

—The Book of Job

A UNIVERSAL HUMAN DRAMA

Certain themes occur repeatedly in folklore, fairy tales, and classical mythology. These themes are universal; that is, they are part of the human drama in all places through all times. Therefore, these themes run like vital threads through the fabric of our own lives.

One of these important themes is the “descent into ashes.” In fairy tales and folklore, ashes represent a “sooty, depressed, ‘out of it’ time” of sorrow and suffering.¹ Cinderella, the cinders or ashes girl, was a scullery maid who cleaned the hearth, washed the dishes, and slaved down on her knees, scrubbing the floor for her abusive stepmother and her debutante sisters. In the ancient story *Iron John*, popularized by Robert Bly, the youthful son of the king descended into ashes by taking a dirty job as a cook’s helper, carrying wood and water and raking the cinders around the hearth in the basement kitchen of a distant castle.

Ashes into Gold

In the opening story of the present book, the young soldier descended into the underworld and spent his days shoveling the ashes around the cauldrons of hell.

The universal drama of descent into ashes is not only a recurring theme in fairy tales and folklore, but is also a theme that recurs in many stories recorded in the Holy Bible. In the Old Testament story of Job, the descent into ashes is portrayed in dramatic fashion. After his many children were killed in a violent storm and all his vast possessions and properties had been destroyed, the once-prosperous Job sat in a pile of ashes for weeks, scraping the sores that had arisen on his body and mourning the loss of his family as he struggled to understand the tragedy that had become his life. The Old Testament also recounts the story of Joseph, an arrogant boy whose descent into the ash pile of sorrow and suffering began when he was thrown into a dry well by his jealous older brothers. Later, Joseph was sold into slavery and taken to Egypt, where, eventually, he was put in prison. From these ancient stories we learn that the descent into ashes is a time of pain, sorrow, and great suffering.

MANY ROADS LEAD DOWN

These ancient narratives, however, describe only a few of the avenues that lead down into the ashes of life. To be sure, there are other roads that lead down, for the descent into ashes may be taken by many routes. Some have descended into ashes as a result of a devastating accident. Joni Eareckson Tada, a noted Christian author and speaker, descended into ashes as a teenager when she dove into the water and broke her neck. Today, she remains paralyzed from the neck down. Others have descended into ashes because of a debilitating illness. Dave Dravecky, the strong young athlete who lost his pitching arm to cancer, descended into ashes when the disease destroyed his career as a professional baseball player. Others have descended into ashes

Descent into Ashes

because of social and political injustice. The famous Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, author of *The Gulag Archipelago*, descended into ashes when he was cast into the seemingly hopeless degradation of a Communist slave camp.

Many others have descended into ashes in less dramatic but more common fashion. Divorce, a heart-wrenching descent accompanied by devastating pain and heartache for all involved, is a well-worn path into the ash pile of life. Unemployment takes many down into the sooty realm of ashes. The sixty-year-old executive fired from a life-long career soon after the arrival of a young boss with new ideas knows the suffocating feeling of descent. Depression, a physical-emotional disorder known as the common cold of psychiatry, takes millions in our society spiraling downward. Addiction is a common road that leads many in our society into ashes. In Alcoholics Anonymous, addiction is described as an elevator that goes only one direction: down. One who walks into his first A.A. meeting and says, "My name is Chris; I'm an alcoholic," knows he has gone down into ashes. Like the alcoholic, the bright young lawyer who snorts away her license and her future because of her captivity to cocaine understands the descent into ashes. The compulsive gambler who loses his home and family knows the taste of ashes when he takes yet another meal at the rescue mission. Moreover, the battered wife whose dependency chains her to an abusive husband knows the ashen feel of enslavement. And the popular, tearful, but clandestinely promiscuous televangelist caught with the prostitute also understands the depth of the descent into ashes.

Like Icarus, the arrogant youth of Greek mythology who flew too near the sun, we all eventually plummet downward and experience the ashes side of life: the dark, grimy, sooty realm of sorrow and suffering. Those who have practiced the spiritual principles known as the Twelve Steps know that Step One is the ashes step: we admit that we are powerless, that at least in some sense, our lives have become unmanageable. This step

Ashes into Gold

is simply a way of saying that our wings have melted, that we have descended from the sunny, happier realm of life, and have crashed, tangled and torn, into the ash heap of “pain, brokenness, and human limitation.”²

RISING FROM THE ASHES

The descent into ashes, however, is not merely a time of meaningless hardship and suffering; it is also the beginning of a transitional period, a time of metamorphosis when, like the mythical phoenix, something old dies and something new rises in its place. Myth, folklore, fairy tales, and most importantly, the sacred texts of the Holy Bible teach the universal truth that the sooty, depressed time in the ashes of life is, for many of us, a prerequisite to the healing, change, and growth that leads to psychological, emotional, and spiritual wholeness.³ After her time as the ashes maid, Cinderella—not her arrogant and spoiled sisters—won the heart of the charming prince and spent her remaining days in the palace. After shoveling the ashes around the hearth in the basement kitchen of a distant castle, the golden-haired son of the king in the story of *Iron John* grew from youthful naiveté to mature manhood and future kingship. Following his descent into the ash pile of suffering and sorrow, Job built a new family and regained his fortune. After his time of slavery and imprisonment, the once-arrogant Joseph grew to become the wise and insightful prime minister of Egypt.

Therefore, ashes represent not only a time of sorrow, suffering, and brokenness, but also the beginning of a requisite time of transition that is marked by significant growth and change and followed by eventual restoration and healing. As seen in the stories of Cinderella, the son of the king in *Iron John*, the gallant young soldier who descended into hell, and in the stories of Job and Joseph, the descent into ashes is the beginning of a painful

but essential metamorphosis, a vital time wherein ashes begin to be transformed into gold.

ROOTED IN ASHES

We may gain greater insight into the meaning of the descent into ashes by considering two very dissimilar kinds of trees: the oak and the palm. Before the oak can grow to maturity and provide acorns for animals, shelter for birds, and shade for people, it must first send its roots down deep into the earth. The mighty oak's strength and substance come from its earthy rootedness, for the depth reached by its massive but unseen roots exceeds even the height attained by its towering branches. On the other hand, the palm, which loves the bright and sunny places and may even ascend to great heights, has roots that are shallow and weak; thus, the palm is the first to fall when the ill wind of the hurricane approaches. A tree whose roots do not reach down deep is easily destroyed.

Those of us who would grow toward maturity and wholeness must go down before we can grow up. Like a mighty oak tree, we must be firmly rooted in earthy, ashen soil. Our psychological, emotional, and (especially) spiritual growth is nurtured by the descent into the ashes of pain, brokenness, and human limitation. Without the initiating descent, there may be no spiritual maturity nor depth of character.

On the other hand, those who never descend into the ash pile of life are doomed to emotional shallowness and spiritual immaturity. Like the sun-loving palm whose roots do not reach deep into earthy ashen soil, they lack depth and substance; thus, they are poorly equipped to withstand life's ill winds. In their youth-like arrogance and naiveté, they lack the hard-won wisdom of those whose faces have been smeared with ashes. Like Peter Pan, they remain youths who never grow up: their faces shine and their hair is golden, but their gold is counterfeit, merely

Ashes into Gold

the fool's gold of the inexperienced, the untried, and the naive. Though bright-eyed, these eternal youths live in a clouded realm of delusion and denial in which the troubles of humanity are merely rumors or interesting topics of debate in late afternoon gatherings by the pool at the club. Like the inexperienced son of the king in Robert Bly's *Iron John*, they know much about gold, but nothing about poverty. Yet, paradoxically, they are doomed to psychological, emotional, and spiritual impoverishment.

Therefore, the descent into ashes marks the beginning of a difficult transformation from relative superficiality, shallowness, and immaturity to psychological, emotional, and spiritual depth, maturity, and wholeness. Bringing more than just a time of brokenness, sorrow, and hardship, the descent into ashes initiates a period of profound change, growth, and healing for those who endure the crucible of pain and suffering.

To those who knew the taste of ashes, the apostle Peter wrote powerful words of comfort:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

(1 Pet. 1:6–7)

A CAVEAT

In regard to the journey of spirituality, I would be remiss if I did not warn the reader that merely descending into the ashes of life does not automatically result in a profound spiritual transformation. To be sure, there are those who experience the ash pile of life only to emerge bitter, disillusioned, and cynical as a result of their pain and suffering. If positive psychological, emotional, and (especially) spiritual transformation is to occur, the decent into ashes must be followed by specific spiritual steps.

Descent into Ashes

For help in understanding this vital point, we may look for guidance to the spiritual program known as the Twelve Steps. Those who have practiced the Twelve Steps know the descent into ashes as Step One. With this step, they admit that they are powerless, that they have lost control of their lives. The admission of powerlessness, however, is only the beginning of the profound transformation that may result from the practice of the spiritual principles embodied in the Twelve Steps. Following Step One, Twelve Steppers learn to believe in a power greater than themselves. Next, they are invited to surrender their wills and their lives to God (as they understand him).

In like manner, the descent into ashes is only the beginning of the journey of spirituality. For spiritual transformation to occur, the descent must be followed by faith in the transforming power of God; we must believe that God can, in fact, turn our ashes into gold. We may take heart from the words of the apostle Paul, who assures us that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). Moreover, as the Twelve Steps teach, we must surrender our wills and our lives to the divine will. While we will have much more to say about faith and surrender in the pages to follow, suffice it to say for now that we must become willing clay in the hands of the master potter (Isa. 64:8).

CONTEMPORARY ILLUSTRATIONS

Thus far, we have learned that the theme of descent and transformation is repeated not only in fairy tales and folklore, but also in biblical stories. In addition to these sources, contemporary illustrations can deepen our understanding of the universal drama of descent, transformation, and ultimate redemption. Let us examine the lives of Bill Wilson and Charles Colson, two twentieth-century figures who experienced the descent into ashes in dramatic fashion.

Ashes into Gold

Bill Wilson

Bill Wilson's deep descent into chronic alcoholism caused him to lose everything he thought made him who he was. Although he was once a successful New York stockbroker, as a result of his chronic drinking, Wilson experienced financial ruin, as well as psychological, emotional, and spiritual collapse.

During one of Wilson's many alcohol-related hospitalizations, a former drunk named Ebby, who had maintained sobriety as a result of practicing certain spiritual principles, visited him. Wilson was not quite ready at that first visit to pay attention to spiritual matters, but during a subsequent hospitalization, Ebby visited him again and explained once more the principles that had empowered him to remain sober. After Ebby's second visit, Wilson had an intense spiritual experience which he later described as follows:

Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in my mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. . . . All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence. . . . A great peace stole over me and I thought, "No matter how wrong things seem to be, they still are right. Things are all right with God and his world."⁴

After reading William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Wilson learned that intense spiritual experiences such as his "nearly all had the common denominators of pain, suffering and calamity. Complete hopelessness and deflation at depth were almost required to make the recipient ready."⁵ Wilson was intimately familiar with "deflation at depth"—what we describe in the present book as the descent into ashes.

After his experience that day in the hospital, Wilson learned

to maintain sobriety by sharing his story with other alcoholics. In conjunction with an alcoholic doctor from Ohio, he began a support group for those who wished to recover from alcoholism. Eventually, Wilson authored the Twelve Steps, a program of spiritual principles designed to effectively aid alcoholics in the maintenance of healthy sobriety.

The support group for alcoholics co-founded by “Bill W.” is, of course, Alcoholics Anonymous. From its modest beginnings, A.A. has spread throughout the world and is now a readily accessible program of support for those who seek help in overcoming problems related to alcohol abuse. In addition, numerous other support groups have developed that employ, in modified form, the original Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (e.g., Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Relationships Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Al-Anon and Alateen). Today, millions of people worldwide practice the spiritual principles embodied in the steps conceived by Bill Wilson, the former drunk now considered one of the greatest social architects of the Twentieth Century. Truly, God turned his ashes into gold.

Charles Colson

Charles Colson is another outstanding example of how God turns ashes into gold. Colson is founder and president of Prison Fellowship, a Christian ministry that brings to those in prison the message of love taught by Jesus of Nazareth, and also seeks to improve conditions in prisons throughout the world. Colson is the author of numerous books, including *Loving God, Kingdoms in Conflict*, and *How Now Shall We Live?*

Colson has written extensively about his imprisonment that was associated with the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s. As a high-ranking official in the Nixon administration, Colson served as a special counsel to the president. He held a position of

Ashes into Gold

power and prestige. His office was inside the White House and the president of the United States called him by his first name. Colson had risen to the top; the American dream had come true for him. But then came the fateful Watergate scandal that led to the collapse of the Nixon administration. Colson and others were sentenced to prison.

Charles Colson's descent into ashes was a deep one: from a powerful office in the White House to a prison cell. In this state of powerlessness, Colson came to know a power greater than himself: while in prison, Charles Colson came to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

Colson has commented in his writings about the ironic twist his life has taken. He wrote most cogently about the thoughts he had one day in particular as he awaited his turn to speak at a prison chapel service:

As I sat on the platform, waiting my turn at the pulpit, my mind began to drift back in time . . . to scholarships and honors earned, cases argued and won, great decisions made from lofty government offices. My life had been the perfect success story, the American dream fulfilled. But all at once I realized it was *not* my success God had used to enable me to help those in this prison, or in hundreds of others just like it. My life of success was not what made this morning so glorious—all my achievements meant nothing in God's economy. No, the real legacy of my life was my biggest failure—that I was an ex-convict. My greatest humiliation—being sent to prison—was the beginning of God's greatest use of my life. He chose the one experience in which I could not glory for his glory.

Confronted with this staggering truth, I discovered in those few moments in the prison chapel that my world was turned upside down. I understood with a jolt that I had been looking at life backward. But now I could see: only when I lost everything I thought made Chuck Colson a great guy had

Descent into Ashes

I found the true self God intended me to be and the true purpose of my life.⁶

In prison, in defeat and humiliation, in total powerlessness, Charles Colson's life was transformed. Since that time, through both Prison Fellowship and his numerous books, Colson has helped spread throughout the world the healing message of love taught by Jesus of Nazareth. Also, as a ministry to both soul and body, Prison Fellowship has brought about improvements in the living conditions of those in prison.

IN SUMMARY

Whether found in the lives of contemporary figures such as Bill Wilson and Charles Colson; in fables, fairy tales and folklore; or in the sacred writings of the Holy Bible—the story is always the same: the descent into ashes, that painful plunge into sorrow and suffering that can be taken by many routes, may be a new beginning wherein our lives are transformed by God, the master alchemist who turns our ashes into gold.