

Bob Dylan – Every Grain of Sand

An analysis by Kees de Graaf

Here is an analysis on one of the greatest songs Dylan has ever written: 'Every Grain of Sand'. The song was composed sometime during the summer of 1980, in an intensely creative period. Heylin quite rightly observes that 'this song was the summation of his attempts to express what the promise of redemption meant to him personally. One of his most intensely personal songs, it also remains one of his most universal'. Paul Williams: 'The song is about the moments in which we accept our pain and vulnerability and bow down (and are lifted up by) the will of God'. As performed on the SOL album the song also as Jonathan Cott noted 'elicits from Dylan one of the most ethereal, healing harmonica solos he has ever produced'.

“In the time of my confession, in the hour of my deepest need When the pool of tears beneath my feet flood every newborn seed There's a dying voice within me reaching out somewhere, Toiling in the danger and in the morals of despair”.

He first focuses attention to the time of his confession. That must have been sometime in 1979 when he was converted to Christianity and joined the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. That was in the hour of his deepest need when he realized how depraved and lost he was, when everything turned against him, when the hunger inside him could no longer be denied, when he was broken, shattered like an empty cup, when he was near the pit, full of emptiness and wrath, and the fire that burns in it, when he began to realize that he had escaped death so many times, when there was this pool of tears and sorrow beneath his feet that made him cry out to God for help. At the same time something new happened to him at that time; there was this newborn seed within him, that purified his soul through the Spirit (I Peter 1:22) which made him obey the truth. Something drastic happened to him: he became a newborn Christian. Not just a whim but something that affected him to the very bone of his existence, something irreversible and incorruptible as it is said in I Peter 1:23: 'Being born again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God'. A new man - a reborn man - arose within him resulting not in a peaceful and quiet life but in a struggle against the former old man which resists the coming of the new man: 'it's the ways of the flesh to war against the spirit, twenty four hours a day you can feel it and you can hear it, using all angles underneath the sun, and He never give up till the battle is lost or won'. This is the struggle that floods the new born seed, it may flood this seed but it will never destroy it, (Cf I Peter 1:6-8) because there is this 'dying voice' within him. One would have expected the poet to say there 'was' this dying voice because he refers to the time of his confession, but he says there 'is' a dying voice, meaning this voice is still there and has been there all along. Conversion is not something that happens during one's lifetime as a static fact but it is a continuous process of learning and growing in faith. And as his faith grows this voice of the old man dies more and more, this voice that keeps on reaching out till the very last breath, urging a person to go back

to his former life of sin and uselessness, of 'eating with the pigs off a fancy tray', toiling in the danger, trying to get a man back into the danger zone and to the morals of despair. These are the morals of despair: 'let us eat and drink because tomorrow we will die' (I Cor. 15:32)

Part II

“Don't have the inclination to look back on any mistake, Like Cain, I now behold this chain of events that I must break. In the fury of the moment, I can see the Master's hand, In every leave that trembles, in every grain of sand”.

In spite of the new born seed man is still inclined to sin. He will continue to fall into sin and temptation but there is a difference now: he no longer indulges in sins but through the grace of the Spirit he starts to hate sins (cf Rom.7:15) and to wage war against the voice of that old 'Heart of Mine', sometimes still so malicious and full of guile. As life goes on, progress in this battle is made, the voice is dying, but will never be entirely conquered in lifetime. The 'inclination' not to confess sins and mistakes stubbornly holds on to its position and now he is faced with the same dilemma as once Cain in Genesis 4. One thing is certain: he doesn't want to end up like Cain of whom I John 3: 11,12 says: 'For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous'.

So if we take a look at Genesis 4 what is the 'chain of events'?:

Gen 4:8: Cain slew his brother Abel

Gen 4:9-12: The LORD: 'What hast thou done, the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground, and now art thou cursed from the earth, a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth'.

Gen 4: 13 Cain: 'My punishment is greater than I can bear, everyone that findeth me shall slay me'

So the chain of events is: if you slay somebody, you will be slain in the end. There is no escape: kill or you get killed: the law of the jungle. If the LORD has condemned you, there is no escape, at least that is what Cain thought. It is the LORD only however who breaks this chain of events, there is room for repentance: Gen. 4:15: 'Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold'. Abel worshipped at an alter in faith (Gen 4:1), Cain worshipped at an alter of a stagnant pool, and when he saw his reflection, he was fulfilled. He did not care about the fate of his brother, only worshipped himself, what will happen to ME? The poet wants to follow Able in faith (Hebr. 11:4), in awe and deep respect for the hand and great majesty of an Almighty God: 'In the fury of the moment I

can see the Master's hand, in every leave that trembles, in every grain of sand. Here he echoes William Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence'. In the fury of a moment, in an instant the decision is taken. If you turn to God you will learn to see that he is everywhere, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, from the giant star galaxies to the tiniest life under a microscope (Psalm 139 and 104). He has counted every grain of sand at the sea shore to be his (Gen 22:17). He has His Hand in the beauty of nature. Dylan (1981): 'Beauty can be very deceiving, and it's not always of God. Beauty appeals to our eyes..... The beauty of the sunset.... that's God-given. I spent a lot of time dealing with man-made beauty, so that sometimes the beauty of God's world has evaded me'. However, not in this song.

Part III

***'Oh, the flowers of indulgence and the weeds of yesteryear,
like criminals, they have choked the breath of conscience and good cheer.
The sun beat down upon the steps of time to light the way
to ease the pain of idleness and the memory of decay'.***

Not only the flowers of the city but also the flowers of indulgence though breath like, get deathlike at times. Indulgence always has an element in itself of giving in to something while you know that it ain't no good. Indulgence is like a beautiful flower, very attractive and full of temptation at first sight but very short-lived indeed. There was indulgence in the weeds of yesteryear, indulgence in all that rubbish he once adored; how much poison did he inhale? The flowers of indulgence are not deathlike at times, they are bound to end up in death. Indulgence often leads to lust, 'then when lust has conceived, it brings forth sin -weeds -: and sin, when it is finished, brings forth death' (James 1:15).

Indulgence and the weeds of yesteryear choke the breath of conscience and good cheer. Criminal activity - in essence acting against the universally acclaimed laws of God - sticks in the throat and defiles the mind, it prevents a person from being honest to God. Just like that righteous king David - who once wrote psalms beside moonlit streams - lost his good conscience and his cheer in life after the adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent assassination of Uriah (II Sam.11) acknowledged his sin:

'When I kept silent, my bones waxed old through my roaring all day long, for day and night Your Hand was heavy upon me, my moisture is turned into the drought of summer' (Ps. 32:3). Good conscience is pure breathing in a polluted world and deep cheer and joy inside. The opposite is to take a deep breath and indulge, but if feels like you are choking, nothing left but debris: 'Everything is broken".. Pure breath and good conscience to the pure but 'unto them that are defiled and unbelieving there is nothing pure, but even their mind and conscience is defiled (Tit.2:15).

The poet however, draws consolation from the fact that there is a road leading forward to the end of all times. During every sunrise and sunset the poet is in awe of its beauty and during the day when the sun beats down upon the stairs of time, he knows that the sun at the same time lights the way forward to the final restoration of all things. Though the book of lyrics has the 'sun' beats down upon the stairs of time, it would also fit to read 'Son' instead, certainly during the time when this song was written. The Son has time and history in His hands and takes us by the hand along the roads of time, constantly beating on the stairs of time leading up to heaven, to wake us up. That eases the pain of idleness and the memory of decay. This pain will never be removed entirely as his new TOOM song 'Trying to get to heaven' has learned us. In fact the pain lingers on, it is the same pain Ecclesiastes once had: 'Vanity of all vanities, what profit has a man of all his labor which he takes under the sun, one generation passes away and another generation comes: but the earth abides for ever. The sun also rises and goes down and hastes to his place where he arose' (Ecc. 1:4).

Part IV

***“I gaze into the doorway of temptations angry flame
And every time I pass that way I always hear my name
Then onward in my journey I come to understand
That every hair is numbered like every grain of sand”.***

One thing is certain, you cannot avoid a doorway, you have to pass it often many times a day. There is an angry flame burning in this doorway from which there is no escape, the flame is not like the eternal flame quietly burning in "Watered-Down Love". That was the ethereal flame of pure love. But this flame of temptation is angry and ignited by hell fire to call the poet back to the life he came from and to have him pay tribute to the kings he once served, back to the life full of emptiness and wrath.

Will he make it through and be able to resist the devil's blinding light that can be most blinding? Yes, because onwards in his journey he came to understand something. It was a learning process. It was something he did not understand when he first became a Christian but he learned to understand it. At first he thought that man is fully responsible for his acts to God which is true. But later he learned that there is another truth which is equally true at the same time: that every hair is numbered, echoing St. Matthew 10:30: "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" Man is responsible but God is at the same time in control of the tiniest detail of a person's life. God is there, under the microscope, in the barrels of your skin and when a sparrow falls on the ground. In fact it is the only way to resist temptation's angry flame, realizing that you need not do it on your own but that He will give you the power and will guide you through seas most severe. Power and ability to do it are both in the Master's hand.

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