



CAN YOU SEE HIM?

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The Journey Inwards – The Search Upwards

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by **Randy Doyle Hazlett**

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Introduction

One who cannot testify to God's grace and goodness, let him examine his eternal destiny.

"Look over there! There's a rhinoceros eating a snake," a small voice proclaimed. "So, I see a dragon spewing fire and smoke across the whole earth," said a second. "Where is it? I wanna see that," returned the first. As the older child pointed up and out through the window, the younger sibling fought with his seatbelt in order to get a better look. "I don't see it," he said impatiently. "Why not, it's right there," rebuked the older. "See, there's the head with its bumpy scales, and his tail stretches beyond the sun," my daughter said convincingly as she dragged her finger across the window. "Oh, I see it now," exclaimed my son, "but did you see my rhinoceros?" I took a moment from my driving to glance skyward, as I wanted to see a dragon and a rhino eating a snake too.

Looking for cloud patterns is an exciting pastime, especially for kids in the car. I can't tell you how many times the previous story has been played out. Often, one makes an extraordinary find, and everyone else wants to see it for themselves. Now, all don't always agree on the shapes they see. Two can look at the same set of clouds and see something entirely different. It's a matter of perspective -- frame of reference. At the same time, we can pass hundreds of cars with occupants not playing the game at all. These

only see that there are clouds in the heavens -- just clouds, nothing more.

People are shaped by the course of human experience. Souls are redeemed by the willingness to see God's outstretched hand to help us through each of those experiences. Some float through life without seeing the imprint of God, as He carefully molds His most precious creation, us. It is possible to have joy through the pain, the tears, and the laughter. The Bible teaches about perseverance, submission, and victory. It also teaches us to accept trials, because God disciplines those He loves. This book documents a few of my own life shaping experiences. Some may read and just see coincidence. I choose to see a divine purpose in character-building events, interwoven at the right time and in proper sequence.

The experiences I document are open to interpretation -- yours. You may only see a story, the clouds. Alternatively, you may see a pattern completely different from mine. Regardless, just as in cloud watching, I'd like to describe for you what I see, take you by the hand over to my frame of reference, and patiently point out the detail from my window on the world. Whether you agree with me or not is not really critical. What is important is what you'll see when you return to your own window on life. You may just find the pattern you see over and over again is one of God's love for you.

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1 A Testimony

For years I was concerned that I had no Christian testimony. I grew up attending a Bible preaching, Baptist church. I was from a middle class, dual parent family, and wanted for nothing. I had no heart-wrenching lost-and-found story to tell. I knew nothing of illegal drugs. I had done no jail time. My story was extremely blasé, and I was embarrassed to tell others of my simpleton "conversion" experience. Today I rejoice in the fact that I had Christian parents, Bill and Doylene, who saved me the grief of learning things the hard way. I am grateful I had parents who provided a spiritually healthy environment, where exposure to God's word, God's expectations, and His road to salvation were assured at an early age.

I recall my parents telling me at kindergarten age that someday I may feel God calling me, and if I did receive such a message, I could take a special bath. Now I'm sure that's not exactly how it was related to me, but who knows how a kid's mind works anyway? Needless to say, I was not like little Samuel from the Bible who audibly heard God calling his name, but like Samuel after he'd been prepped by his mentor, Eli, I was ready for that call if and when it came.

I was a Jekyll-Hyde kid. I was a perfect angel in school and in public, but at home I was always in trouble. I was the second of four brothers and fell victim to the four year rule. If there are at least four years between siblings, then the number of life threatening confrontations approaches zero. A child has sense enough to recognize that someone four years his elder, as a general rule, can inflict serious pain. A child also has the savvy to know that a sibling four years his junior poses no real threat. My older brother was a year and a half older than me, while I was only three years older than son number three. My little brother was a whole eight years younger, which totally exempted him

from all brotherly conflict. I got it from both sides, however, and I received what seemed the lion's share of punishment. It appears natural from the parental standpoint that if little Randy was always involved, Randy must be the source of the familial strife. I'm sure that all the positive feedback from outside the home had my parents scratching their heads.

I don't have recollection of the particular year. I must have completed either fourth or fifth grade when Vacation Bible School rolled around. My brothers and I attended every year. It was great. Where else can you get fruit punch and sugar cookies just for saying a short passage or two from the Bible? As it turned out, everyone got juice and cookies regardless, but we didn't know that.

This particular year I recall a special guest coming for our assembly time. He was an artist, and he painted a picture right before our eyes. I loved art. Why, my kindergarten teachers felt I was gifted in art and encouraged my parents to take me to art school at one of the local museums. I went for a while. I'm not sure why the lessons ended, but I still carry a love of art with me today. Anyway, this guest artist painted a portrait of a resurrected Jesus standing at a door, knocking. He said something was missing from the painting. No one could guess what, although a few tried. Then the artist added the nail scars to the painting and presented a crucified, ascended Lord who is waiting for an invitation to come into our lives. I had a strange reaction, just like the joy and uneasiness that comes after placing the final piece in a 2000-piece jigsaw puzzle. I recall turning to my friends seated at my right and left and asking them if they were going to go forward during the invitation at the close of the worship service. They weren't coming, but that didn't stop me. I wanted Jesus, and I was ready for my special bath. The pastor said later in a conference with my mother that I almost beat the organist to the punch, I was down the aisle so quickly.

Well that's it -- my conversion experience. I can't say that I never fought with my brothers again, because I did. The frequency certainly went down though. For years, I thought my story just didn't measure up. When people would share their testimonies during youth rallies in high school, I never volunteered. Why, I'd have to stretch things just to fill a minute, so I thought. Only much later did I come to realize that a testimony is not only a list of facts or events leading up to becoming a Christian, but it includes any and all of life's situations which glorify God and His character.

Reflections

It is expected of each and every Christian to have and share a testimony. If we are ashamed of Jesus, He will not acknowledge us before the Father in heaven. This generation is constantly asking, "What have you done for me lately?" All Christians should be ready and willing to answer if questioned, "What has God done for you lately?" It's funny that those who are busy serving others are the set that will always have an answer. How would you answer that question?

In the pages to come, I indirectly set forth three overpowering principles:

- divine appointment,
- divine intervention, and
- divine purpose.

As I look back over life-shaping events, I am able to look to the future with confidence in a loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God. I wish to instill in you, the reader, that same confidence and challenge you to recall your similar set of experiences. For the non-Christian, this may be a frustrating task, as the struggle for life's purpose is an elusive one. Even for the Christian, we are

often so engrossed in living for the day that we fail to see the big picture. When you've confronted your past and can be thankful for it, you are ready to embrace the future, regardless of whether its extent is measured in years or minutes.

2 Pawnee

The summers of my youth were spent on my grandparents' farm in South Texas. Pawnee was a dying town, desperately trying to hold on to its identity. Pawnee still had a school, a post office, a convenience store, and a couple of churches. The Forty-Two parties kept the community glued together. Funerals gave folks a chance to visit, and people got the opportunity often. Pawnee was surely a town in transition after the closing of the local cotton gin, but Pawnee was a wonderful place.

For city folk, Pawnee represented an entirely different world. It was a world of values: a hard day's work, a good education, a hearty meal, a strong family, a big hug. Pawnee was the one place where a budding artist had no difficulty selling his paint-by-number masterpiece. For the curious, the day just wasn't long enough, but in Pawnee, that didn't matter because another one was right around the corner. The local attractions didn't keep drawing my brothers and me back to Pawnee, because there weren't any. It must have been those two notable residents of Pawnee, Doyle and Delma Hair, or as we knew them, Grandad and Mim, that kept us begging to go back time and time again.

A South Texas summer is unbearable as an adult, but for us, it was okay as long as we got to ride in back of Grandad's pickup truck. We also knew that at the end of every trip to the field was a tall cool glass of Coca Cola™, or at least a Standpipe Julep. For the intellectually curious, a Standpipe Julep is a fancy name for a glass of water. Years passed before we figured that one out. No one cared to try the unknown when a Coke was a sure thing on a scorcher of a day. After it cooled off a bit in the evenings, we might sit on the porch for a while. If there were ever four of us under one roof, though, it was time for Canasta.

I don't know if other folks even play Canasta the same way as we did. I've never had the opportunity to trade notes with another Canasta player outside the family to check. The only way we knew to add a new player was to get someone married off or have a baby, in that order of preference to save time. Although we were family, there was no mercy shown around the kitchen table. Often we'd draw for initial partners, but the inevitable team challenge would set the pairings for days and sometimes weeks at a time. We'd play until one team had enough for the day, then bargain for a final hand-for-a-game to try and even the score. You had to have your "feet on the floor" to win.

Oh, we all settled into individual styles of play. Mim was a straightforward, conservative player. Grandad was often the gambler, taking calculated risks that would surprise and frustrate both the opposition and his partner. My older brother, Darren, was like Mim. My brothers, Kreg and Trace, were more like Grandad. I liked to keep everyone guessing by alternating between the practical and the revolutionary. Losing was painful, but there was always another game. The boasting was much more difficult to handle. Win or lose, every night ended the same way -- with a midnight snack. Usually a bowl of ice cream would do wonders for a bruised ego. It hit the spot, and God knows, we needed the nourishment for the grueling day of BB gun hunting and card playing to come.

I'm sure there must have been a first BB gun given to each of us as a birthday or Christmas present, but I can't recall it. Why, we had BB guns from the time we could walk. We'd make several hunting trips a day, up and down the dirt and caliche trails just looking for things to shoot. I hate to say it, but birds drew our attention above all else. After all, we were on a farm, and the fact that Grandad had placed a bounty on certain birds naturally drew our attention skyward. Not that we were blooming entrepreneurs, because we really didn't have any need for money, but the reward for bringing in the bad guy had a certain old west charm. I think you can mark the maturity point for each of us as we each

individually turned our sights towards tin cans and away from living things.

There are some creatures, however, that were difficult for us to categorize as God's beautiful creations. Bullbats fell into that category. That's what we called them anyway. Right about dusk, they'd come swooping around the house, a half-dozen or so at a time. They were fast. I never do recall seeing one land. In fact, I don't really know what they looked like up close. Needless to say, we never did bag one. It was fun trying though. We'd shoot in the air at our rapidly moving targets. Every so often one of us would claim to have shot off a tail feather, but there's no evidence for that. Do bullbats even have feathers? We'll never know. When it grew too dark to see, we'd retire our weapons, go back inside, and claim victory over the bullbats nevertheless.

Ants were also critters we'd show no mercy. It's hard to love something that adults put poison out for anyway. I don't know how many ants were decapitated with our pocket knives. Did I mention pocket knives? Grandad gave us some fine specimens. Cutting up ants is about all we ever used them for though.

Oh, when we were older, they'd come in handy around Christmas time when an enthusiastic gift giver would get a little bit carried away with the Scotch[®] tape. Whenever there was a lull in the unwrapping action due to technical difficulties, there'd be the equivalent of a race to see who could pull out their pocket knife first to get the ball rolling again. Did I mention we always unwrapped presents in a sequential order, prescribed by the luck of the draw? Everyone was interested in seeing each gift, but none of us were willing to wait too long between presents -- kind of like watching fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Anyway, roasting ants with a magnifying glass was a second local favorite. A South Texas summer has plenty of sunshine to fuel that activity. Why on some days, ants were about the only creatures willing to venture out into the dull heat. As soon as one

of us would get bitten or stung (I still don't know which end of an ant is responsible), we'd move on to a safer activity. It was either that or we'd unleash the full force of our vengeance on all their relatives. It was important to end on a high note.

We'd also go to the softer ground in search of doodle bugs. Some people call them ant lions, but doodle bug is as good a name as any for these guys. Doodle bugs make cone-shaped indentions in the loose soil to catch their prey. A small insect, such as an ant, which falls into the pit, cannot easily get out. The doodle bug keeps a captive audience by throwing more dirt. In doing so, he removes the debris which falls to the bottom, maintains the steep angle, and waits for the prey to tire, get buried alive, fall to the bottom, or escape. If the insect is big or strong enough to free itself from the pit, the doodle bug probably didn't want to meet up with it anyway. There might be some question as to which one was the food.

Somewhere under the dirt lies the doodle bug, just waiting. The fun in this activity was in the hunting style. We'd carefully imitate a poor, small unsuspecting bug, hoping that the doodle bug would reveal his position. It was important not to create too large of a disturbance, just a slight cascading of grains, or the doodle bug would not dare move. Should this rule be violated, the only hope was an offensive attack. You'd have to poke the dirt with a small twig trying to locate a doodle bug in retreat.

Unlike the ants, we never harmed the doodle bugs. We'd catch them, let them tickle the palm of our hand, and place them in a Dixie cup partially filled with dirt. We had a competition to see who could collect the most, the largest, or the smallest, then we'd set them free. It was important never to set the ground rules ahead of time so that each of us could claim some kind of victory based upon our final inventory.

Rattlesnakes were fairly commonplace also, so much so that we always traveled with a hoe, just in case we'd happen onto one

crossing the road. When Grandad would sight one, he'd stop the pickup in the middle of the road and tell us to stay in the back. Parking in the road was never a problem around Pawnee. Why, meeting up with an oncoming car was proper reason to pull over and chat a while. Anyway, after a sighting, Grandad would grab the hoe, quickly but cautiously approach the snake, and whack off his head. The big ones might take a couple whacks. Then, he'd pull out his pocket knife and cut off the rattlers for us. These were trophies for us. They made great show-and-tell items when we'd return to school.

Mim and Grandad had a number of cats and dogs over the years, but the pair of animals with the most longevity was a couple of Heinz 57 dogs named Ginger & Twiggy. Ginger was a male dog with medium length hair of the same color. Twiggy was a small, long-haired, attention-seeking female dog of gentle nature. Ginger enjoyed going hunting with the guys, but Ginger usually had a different agenda. He'd go on a rabbit chase, unaware that he didn't stand a chance. Ginger had much better luck with mice and rats. He had a peculiar hunting style when it came to rodents. He'd literally hop through the tall grass. If he got lucky, he'd land on some poor unsuspecting critter. I guess he figured surprise was his greatest weapon.

It was hard to keep good pets around. Sometimes the dogs would run off with strays. Sometimes the coyotes would claim the cats. You'd think that with the traffic of Pawnee that roadkills would not be a problem, but I suppose the lack of road traffic heightened the curiosity when a car or truck would happen by. I guess that's what made Ginger and Twiggy special. They were around for the long haul. Good dogs were needed to protect the property from encroaching wild animals, e.g. coyotes, skunks, and snakes. Even if he weren't alert enough to intercept an intruder, a dog which would bark to warn his master was worth his/her weight in gold.

I recall the evening when the dogs began barking persistently. We took notice when the distinctive call of a rattler chimed in. The

dogs had discovered a large one, directly under the front porch. Mim and Grandad's old home was of pier and beam construction. It was situated between two fields which were often planted in maize, cotton, or flax. Our unwelcome guest must have wandered in from that immense sanctuary. The first chore was to locate the snake more precisely. As it turns out, this was not a hoe job. Access was a problem, and this would have definitely been a multiple chop task. Grandad said it was time for the shot gun. It was difficult to even get a good line of sight, but I recall later that Grandad was surprised the snake didn't strike, because he was unknowingly within reach. Well, a couple of shots did in that snake. When we drug him out, we found the snake to be as big around as my leg and over six feet long. Those were surely some prize rattlers. Grandad was a great white hunter and number one in our eyes.

Grandad had skill and wisdom, although he had only the equivalent of an eighth grade education. I guess that's why he always bragged on us for doing well in school. Grandad never passed up an opportunity to tell the neighbors in our presence that his grandsons got straight A's in school. To Grandad, anyone we happened across was a neighbor -- farm hands, bank tellers, check-out clerks

We'd ride in back of the truck over to Sefferina's or DeGoya's place and wait for what seemed like hours for Grandad to finish his conversation, much of it about how smart his grandkids were. Given a choice, I'd always rather go to DeGoya's, because he had lots of kids, girls mostly. After bragging on us, Grandad would ask us very loudly which of DeGoya's daughters would we like for him to give us. Of course, this was all in jest and embarrassed us greatly, but I always had my eye out for one of the older ones, the one with long, straight black hair down to her waist.

Mim and Grandad were interested in our education, and we never needed any financial incentives to do well in school. Not that pressure was ever placed on us to excel, but we thrived on the

kind of positive feedback we got from both parents and grandparents. Embarrassing or not, nothing is a better motivator than to hear praise in public for a job well done. Grandad could do that better than anyone.

We'd outgrown the bedtime story ritual, but Grandad sure could tell some captivating stories. Some nights he'd escape from wild Indians by catching a ride on a crocodile. Other nights it would be a bear. We all had nicknames at story time too. I was Possum Holler. My older brother became Cooter Brown only after my mother refused to allow her dad to use his originally assigned name, Boliver Cagnasty. We may have outgrown the story time, but we never outgrew the stories.

We did grow older, but not as fast as my Grandad. He had a persistent cough. He'd given up cigarettes long before, but he never could relinquish his chewing tobacco. The regular spitting drove my grandmother up the wall. Oh, he'd cut down inside the house. Periodically, he would incur the depth of my grandmother's wrath when a fairly full Dixie[®] cup would topple over. Inside the pickup truck, though, it didn't matter. It was a man's truck. I never entertained the idea of ever trying chewing tobacco myself. It was a disgusting habit.

I think the first time I realized that Grandad wouldn't be around forever was the time we all went to Austin to see the high school girls state basketball tournament. One of my distant cousins was playing for Conroe. We parked about a block and a half away and had to walk. I had to double back a couple of times to check on Grandad and offer him a shoulder. We made it. We were in no real hurry -- just like Pawnee.

As I and my three brothers grew older, things changed. It became rare that we'd all be in Pawnee at the same time. Too many other things crept into our lives. I probably was least willing of all to give up my time on the farm. Grandad went into farming after 19 years working with Magnolia Oil Company. I use the term

farming loosely. It wasn't a traditional farm -- not the kind with cows, chickens, pigs, and the sort. Around this part of South Texas, people grew crops that most folks wouldn't recognize. Cotton farming had moved out of the area, although I still remember picking a little when I was younger. Farmers around Pawnee grew mostly things like maize and broomcorn.

Broomcorn is the plant that brooms used to be made of before the advent of polyester fiber and imports from China. Grandad became known as The Broomcorn King. I don't know if Grandad was a good farmer or just fortunate. I think a farmer has to be blessed to make it bigtime. Anyway, I recall working with my older brother in the broomcorn harvest season a few times. Once we got paid to "stir" the broomcorn. Oh, we didn't do anything like stirring. We just moved tied bunches of broomcorn from one wagon trailer to another. It had some relationship to moisture build-up -- I think. I remember wondering if and when Grandad would come back to get us. You see, he just dropped us off in the field and said he'd come back to take us home when we were done. I don't know how he was to know when we would be done, but we were just kids and didn't think to ask. The Texas heat was unbelievable, but the broomcorn made us itch beyond belief. Hot, tired, sweaty, and ready to peel off our skin if we could, we waited for Grandad. Maybe he was off talking to whoever would listen. He liked to talk. It got to the point that we'd choose to stay home with my grandmother rather than make the rounds with Grandad, because you never knew how long you'd be gone with him. He'd drive over to gab with roughnecks on nearby drilling sites. He liked to visit a few families in the area -- people that often worked in the fields for him. I've mentioned a couple of them already. Well, we were thankful when Grandad did show up. I've never been so ready for a bath in all my life.

One summer, I happened to be visiting Pawnee for a stretch of time by myself. I don't remember too much detail about how I passed the time, but I spent my share outdoors. In the evening, Grandad would have me put out some hay or cotton seed for the

cows. One cow was penned up. She was getting ready to have her first calf. I recall Grandad saying that cows often have trouble delivering their first calf. After that, it's a piece of cake. When the time was near, Grandad asked me to watch and alert him when it looked like something was about to happen. I really didn't know what I was looking for in the first place. When I thought I could see something sticking out, I went indoors to warn Grandad.

It turned out to be a false alarm that time. Oh something was sticking out alright, but I guess not out far enough. After a while, I became convinced again that delivery was eminent. This time Grandad agreed. When not much was happening, Grandad decided that the cow needed help. He got out something he called a "come-along" which looked to me more like an automotive tool than anything else. The cow was uncooperative and decided to get up. Grandad worked hard to constrain her movements in the pen. This delivery was apparently going to happen in a standing position. Grandad reached in with the come-along tool to help pull the calf out. He became worried about the calf's orientation. The come-along tool wasn't working. When the calf finally came out, it was not breathing.

I recall my grandmother crying and rubbing the calf to induce breathing. It didn't work. Grandad said something about the calf represented a loss of at least \$300. Grandad asked me to drag the calf out into the field, away from the barn, so the coyotes could dispose of the remains. We tied the calf's feet together. I dragged the dead baby until Grandad motioned from a distance that it was far enough. I left the calf there in the field that day, but I've been dragging the memory of that calf with me ever since. I never cease to be amazed at the wonder of new life. Life is fragile. Every baby born is a miracle. I learned that in Pawnee.

I had finished my bachelors degree and was attending graduate school when the news came that Grandad was in the hospital in nearby Kennedy. He had suffered a heart attack, and although we were told everything would be alright, we quickly put together a

family trip to visit him in the hospital. Grandad was in intensive care, but we were given the opportunity to go see him one at a time for only a minute or so each.

First of all, hospitals instill in me a queasy feeling at best. That might seem strange for someone who ended up marrying a nurse. I don't recall the exact order we were given, but I'm sure that I did not go first. The moment I saw Grandad, I knew his situation was worse than we'd been led to believe. Strangely enough, I was oblivious to all the lab equipment and IV bags this time. As I held Grandad's hand, we talked -- about superficial things mostly. He said he really didn't feel that bad with the exception of difficulty breathing. I was reminded of the time Grandad and I had gone to Corsicana, Texas to visit one of his brothers who suffered from chronic emphysema, following a lifetime of heavy cigarette smoking. The pain in each breath that I recall in my uncle's face was now evident on my grandfather's. My minute was ticking away, and I was encroaching on someone else's turn. When our visitation period had ended, we took Mim to a nearby park to eat a barbecue sandwich picnic lunch. After another hour or so, we began the couple hour ride back to Austin. A few days later, Grandad died of massive heart failure.

For the longest time, I looked back in anger that I only had a minute or two with Grandad -- not enough time to tell him how much he meant to me. Today I'm appreciative that I was able to just go in and hold his hand, because I didn't just have a minute with him, I had one more minute added to a lifetime of experiences and memories.

Two years ago, we began a new tradition. My daughter and her cousin, who is just a few years older, now spend a week of their summer vacation in Pawnee with Mim. Oh, it's not the same old Pawnee -- a lot more television and much less physical activity. It's no longer a working farm. The land is leased to other farmers and ranchers, but at least there are cattle around and about to maintain that certain feel. I'm happy to report that Mim is still able

to handle a couple of young kids. She has longevity in her corner. Mim's mother was recognized by Willard Scott a couple of times, and she lived in her own home, built in the 1890's, until she was 99. I'm glad to report that the Pawnee tradition continues. Pawnee is a wonderful place.

Reflections

Part of the attractiveness of Pawnee was the complete shift in environment: from urban to rural, from rapid-paced to relaxed, from self-centered to people-oriented. Many don't have that made-to-order retreat location, especially as populations continue to swell in our nation's urban and suburban communities. People used to flee to the suburbs to get a taste of the Pawnee lifestyle without giving up completely all the conveniences the nearby metropolitan area has to offer. In response to this, I say that your Pawnee need not be a physically remote place. Rather, Pawnee is a shelter, a haven, an ideal, wherever unconditional love can replace anxiety. The exciting news is that I'm sure there are thousands of other Pawnees out there eagerly waiting to be discovered by America's urban youth.

Who were the people you looked up to in childhood? Was there anyone there to heap on the praise? Was there anyone there to declare you a success, regardless of the outcome? How about today? People, especially kids, can outperform all expectations for those that believe in them. Unfortunately, the converse is true as well. People who are told they're losers and will never amount to anything, can fulfill that prophesy with little or no effort. If you had a parent, grandparent, teacher, or friend that brought the best out of you, you should praise God for granting you that jewel in your life. They have shaped you into you perhaps more than you realize.

For those who never had that unconditional encouragement while growing up, you can fill that role for someone else. But you ask, "What about me?" If it is not in your character to give this kind of praise, I urge you to try it. You may find that the one who will regard you as the apple of their eye will not be the only one being reshaped. If that were not enough to keep your juices flowing, the Bible is crammed full of encouragement from our Heavenly Father. Most of that is reserved for the Christian, but non-Christian, if I haven't lost you yet, there is hope for you. Of all the Bible excerpts to choose from, the following passages are amongst the most encouraging, in my opinion:

Isaiah 40: 28-31

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Romans 8: 28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8: 37-39

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

3 The Price of Victory

Of all sports, basketball has always been my passion. As a five-foot high school freshman, little opportunity was available to me to play in organized team sports. I had skill, but not an overpowering presence. I had a heart for the game, but mine was a foot lower than the coaches wanted. Midway through high school, I had set aside any ambitions of greatness on the basketball court. I had stopped growing at 5'10". It was time to earn a living exercising mental ability rather than physical muscles.

While I was still attending college, my dad approached me with the idea of officiating. By that time, he had done it for a couple of seasons. I had no strong feelings, but I was curious about the perspective on the game as an interactive fan sporting the zebra stripes. The pay was next to nothing, \$5 per game, but I couldn't really call it work either. It wasn't work, but neither could I call it fun. Besides, I was calling games alongside my dad. What could go awry? It was a good father-son bonding activity, or so I thought.

I came to realize I was on the wrong side of participatory sports when the first coach began screaming at me for calling a blocking foul rather than an offensive foul. My dad came to the rescue with an immediate technical foul call on the bench. At the end of the game, the coach came up to me and apologized for his personal attack, but I had already decided that I had more potential on the player side of the game at this juncture in life. More is, of course, a relative term. Other basketball-related opportunities were soon to surface.

Somehow, someway, my dad became the coach of my youngest brother's sixth grade Boy's Club basketball team. My dad, in turn, asked me to help out. Supposedly there were tryouts and something resembling a draft to partition players new to the

league. At the first practice, there were definite signs of a setup. Our team was mostly from a Hispanic marginal neighborhood. It was obvious that these boys had little-to-no organized basketball experience. Their moms probably sent them to the Boy's Club to get them off the streets and out of trouble. In the arena of height, we came up short -- an extreme handicap in the game of basketball I knew all about. At the second or third practice, we were blessed with a new arrival, a tall white boy. Tall he was. Talented he was not. He was clumsy, as are most boys who grow faster than their motor skills. I could already foresee that team discipline was also going to be a problem.

A game or so into the season, I inherited the coaching job. My dad got busy with work and had to miss a few practices. Needless to say, it was a tall order for a college undergrad to handle a team of eleven sixth graders, mostly from the wrong side of town, by myself. As a naive young man, I pushed forward. I was always intrigued by the Boy's Club rule which said that at least ten boys must start and complete a full quarter without substitution. I put together a rotation to abide by the rules and minimize damage by our least physically blessed.

The first game or two revealed that we had one exceptionally talented boy. He could drive to the basket with lowered shoulder and determination. Most sixth graders graciously cleared the lane for him. He was our ace-in-the-hole. He carried us from humiliating defeat to defeat. I'll refer to him as Juan, although that was not his real name. The first game or two also revealed that we had one exceptionally untalented boy. He mostly watched us get beat, except for the third quarter when he got a chance to contribute. I'll call him, Jerry, although that was not his real name, either.

Still early in the season, we came up against our South Austin rivals. The stage was set. From the opening tipoff, the outcome was apparent. We stunk! Our boys didn't take humiliation well. The boys took the personal droning personally. They lost it. We

got flagged with a few technicals. The bench became unruly, and I could not control the action on or off the court. At the end of the game, two men, the dad and step-dad of our tall boy, came up to me. They said they'd pull their kid from the team if I could not manage team behavior better. I knew I needed some help. His name was George. George was his real name!

George was my best friend. It just so happened that he was 6'2" and Hispanic -- just what I needed to help mold this mob into a team. George worked hard with the guys on their play under the basket. He showed them how to position themselves better on offense and defense. He taught them how to leverage their bodies to achieve an advantage over the opponent. He especially worked with the tall kid. It showed. Our team steadily improved, developing skills that weren't there before -- learning that teamwork can win games. The winning spirit was contagious, as we climbed to a winning record.

Near the end of the schedule was a rematch with our South Austin rivals. Like Carrie Shrug, who though hurt from a fall on her first attempt, drew upon every ounce of strength within her for that second vault to bring Olympic gold to herself and her team, like the Dallas Cowboys looked forward to the rematch with the San Francisco Forty-Niners after the Montana-Clarke National Football Conference championship thing, our boys wanted a second chance at those Longhorns.

The rematch came. To the total amazement of the opposition, our team matched them point-for-point. In a slug-out performance where the bench was as much into the game and under control as those on the court, we hung close. At half-time, we knew we could win. We stuck with pretty much our regular rotation from quarter-to-quarter in order to meet the league regulations.

The third quarter was upon us, which carried our weakest line-up. It was time to insert our third quarter exclusive boy. Jerry was unconfident. That lack of confidence was magnified in game

situations. It was not unusual to have only ten kids show for a game, but for this big one, we had all eleven. I had the option of holding out one player, but I didn't. I called for the regular third quarter line-up to check in, including Jerry. The opponents quickly keyed in on our weak link with swarming defense. We lost the ball once and turned it over a second time down the court. One of our players whispered to me, "We have eleven players. We don't have to play Jerry." I responded, "I know," but I stuck with my guys. The next time down the court, Jerry's inability to handle a double team resulted in a steal. It was at that point that I turned to Juan and said, "Go in for Jerry." That was the first time Jerry had not played the entire third quarter. It was the first time he had been pulled from action.

I was too busy to notice Jerry's reaction either in coming off the court or sitting out the remainder of the game on the bench. In retrospect, I should have given him a word of encouragement, devised a strategy to deal with their swarming defense, and reinserted Jerry, but I didn't do any of those. With Juan now in the game, our opponent's game plan unraveled. The game was in the balance until the final minute when we went ahead for good. As the clock ticked down to zero, our team erupted. Our rivals were in a state of shock. Was this the same team they kicked around and humbled a couple of months ago? We were not the same bunch of guys we were at the season opener. We could shoot, we could rebound, we could pass, and we could defend. As an added bonus, if we could defeat our final opponent, we'd proceed into the playoffs. Our confidence level was going supernova -- that is all of us save one.

Jerry was a no-show for the remaining practice and final game. We lost that game and missed the playoff action. But it didn't matter. By everyone's standards, the season was a resounding success -- everyone's but mine. We won the game that gained us respect as a team, but I lost the respect of one boy as his coach. I was hurting. You see, Jerry reminded me of me. I could see myself in Jerry's shoes. I guess that's why I look back on that

game as a low point in my life rather than the pinnacle of my coaching experience. I've not coached since. Perhaps I never will.

Reflections

At a critical juncture in the game, I pulled one boy from the action in order to secure a chance at victory. We won the game, but at what cost? What's really important in life? Winning the game? What's not important in life? Losing the game? Christian hope rests in our victory in Jesus. The game that really counts is already over. It was fought more than two thousand years ago on a Judean hillside. Satan was defeated then and still sits defeated today. Unfortunately, some are living without that knowledge. Don't you be one of them. Read on. Know the score. Celebrate true victory.

4 A Lifemate

I lived a boring life by most standards throughout high school and college. I didn't date until I was a senior in high school. School work came first. Physically, I was less mature than my peers. I had an August birthday, but I think one extra year wouldn't have changed much. I was also kind of small. As a high school freshman, I was under five feet tall and weighed less than 100 pounds. I had discovered girls, but girls hadn't discovered me. That was fine.

At the end of my junior year, I went off to Houston for an engineering summer camp held at Rice University. I had never been totally on my own before. I knew no one in Houston, and not a soul knew me. After my parents drove off, there I was on a college campus, getting a taste of what it was like to be independent. Of course, I wasn't financially independent, but neither did I want to be.

At that camp, I found myself in the midst of other students with high academic standards from all over Texas and Louisiana, and some of them weren't guys. Although there were a few stereotypical girls who had interest and talent in science and math, some appeared to be regular folks -- just like me. Naturally, I didn't consider myself a nerd at all. A few girls, in fact, were quite pretty. One was particularly cute, and she was attracted to me too.

I quickly found out that I didn't even know how to handle a girlfriend. In a romantic moment, I thought a soft, gentle kiss was appropriate. I was indoctrinated into the world of French kissing rather unexpectedly. I felt very awkward. What was this girl doing? I did all I could do just to keep from biting her tongue. I was treading on new ground, but I also knew that when the summer session was over, we'd go back to our respective lives hundreds of miles away. I was just me, and that seemed to be

good enough. The summer session did end. I had learned a lot about engineering, but I'd never look at girls the same way again.

When I return to Austin, I resumed my normal summertime activities. Swimming offered a cool break from the Texas sun. Now my parents have their own pool, but back then, we had to use the municipal pool. It was a few miles away. I was of driving age, but both of my parents worked, leaving no motorized transport for the recreational driver. I enjoyed riding my bike over and back anyway. Over was okay because you could look forward to a refreshing swim. Back ... well, back kind of defeated the purpose of going to the pool in the first place. By the time I'd get home, I'd be hot, sweaty, and tired. I discovered, though, that if I got on my bike with wet clothes and with a wet towel around my neck, by the time I reached home I'd be dry and considerably more comfortable. On one such excursion, I was confronted by a couple of girls I knew from school at the pool entrance. For some reason, they wanted to talk to me. They had my divided attention as their swimming attire made it difficult to converse coherently. I honestly don't remember the second girl, but the first was about to change my life forever.

When school began again, I entered the dating world. It took considerable courage for me to ask out my bikini friend, but I did, and she said yes. We went on a handful of dates before I was informed that she was also seeing someone else. That didn't really bother me, but I don't know why not. I guess I didn't know any better. I continued to casually date that same girl for the next five years. I was definitely in love, but I was never the boyfriend. There was always someone else in the picture to keep me in close friend status. I knew for certain that one day she would be my wife, and I told her so. God's will was never so clear to me. When she was involved with other guys, I'd date others too. More than a single date with the same girl was a rarity though.

Over that time period, I developed patience that would rival Job. I look now upon that period as a gift. God was molding my

character like a lump of clay. Many times that's what I felt like -- a pile of gelatinous mush. Nevertheless, time was my ally. When you're a plane in a holding pattern, you learn how to conserve energy. You learn how to stay above the clouds and ride with the currents. You recognize that it's not your turn and staying where you are is for your own good. You also learn not to sweat the small stuff. If I was ever to develop ulcers, I would have then. I worried a lifetime's worth of worrying over those years. I gave new meaning to the phrase waiting on the Lord.

Today, I have no worries whatsoever. I occasionally have deep concerns, but never worries. I recognize what is under my control and what isn't. I know that events inside and outside my sphere of influence are being handled by my heavenly Father, who never worries a bit, so why should I. The Bible teaches it, so I choose to believe it and live it. That doesn't mean that I am a fatalist, because I'm not. I do not believe that I am disconnected from this world -- that it doesn't matter what I say or do because what has been deemed to take place will happen with me or in spite of me. In the book of Proverbs, the Bible says that only a fool does not avoid danger. I know God has given me an intellect and expects me to make the most of it, just as any other gift, spiritual or otherwise.

Back to my story ... One Christmas season, my Sunday School department decided to have a party. The class directors offered their home as a gathering place. I had invited my non-girlfriend, and she had agreed to accompany me. There I was. I was with the girl of my dreams among Christian friends. Christmas is a great time of year too. People are cheerful and relaxed. Aside from specific nationally recognized days like Valentine's Day or Mother's Day, Christmas is perhaps the only time of year when people have a freedom to express love to others without coercion or guilt. The party was in full swing when something I'd never have anticipated happened. The doorbell rang. Another couple joined the party. I didn't recognize the guy, and the girl had only come to our class once or twice before. I suddenly felt weird. I

found myself almost wishing that I hadn't brought my dream date. I had thoughts of wanting to trade places with whoever the stranger was so that I could be with his date. She was beautiful, but she hardly spoke a word all night -- and certainly not to me. Her name was Rose. She had an exotic appearance -- dark skin, high cheekbones, long black hair in tight waves. Still, she had a sophisticated countenance reflected in her clothes, her posture, her smile, and her quietness. When the evening ended, I decided that I had to find out more about this new girl, but that depended completely on her returning to visit our Sunday School class -- something completely out of my control, but I was an expert on those situations.

Thankfully, she did return, and from the class roll, I was able to match a last name, an address, and a phone number to my Rose. I called her one day to ask her to join me for lunch on campus. You see, I also knew that we attended the same university. I can't tell you which one, but it is the big one in central Texas with 50,000 students or so. A rendez-vous on campus definitely had to be a planned event.

Rose didn't know who was calling her. I guess I blended in with the woodwork pretty well. Having an introverted personality, I never attracted attention. I never wanted to attract attention to myself. Later Rose admitted that she only agreed to meet me because I was a Christian. She didn't know who was going to show up at the sandwich shop that day for a harmless luncheon engagement, only that she might recognize me as a familiar face upon meeting.

That was almost our one and only meeting outside of Sunday School. During lunch, I found out that she was considerably older than I would have guessed, she was Hispanic, she had served in the U. S. Navy, she was divorced, and she had a daughter who was already 10! I really didn't know if I wanted to hear any more. When the lunch ended, my mind was racing as to what I should say in parting. For some reason, of all possible actions, I asked if I

could see her again. She said she didn't know, but when pressed, she asked me to give her a call.

Well, the next encounter or so exposed even more reasons for me to back away. As it turns out, Rose was dirt poor, she was in debt to her neck, and she was an emotional roller coaster. I listened in shock to her life story. Rose never knew her parents. You see, her father murdered her mother in a jealous rage when she was a toddler. She grew up in a small Texas town with an overbearing grandmother and a loving, but passive, grandfather. She had married out of necessity and was a parent by the age I first began dating. Rose had grown up in a culture in which prejudice was openly displayed between Hispanics and Anglos. Rose had not valued education earlier in life, especially in high school. This was the kind of person I would have gone great lengths to avoid just a few short years earlier. However, Rose was now trying to make her life situation better. She could use some help, and there I was.

I suppose there was very little we did have in common. I never missed a college hometown football or basketball game. She'd never gone to a one. I liked outdoor activity. She avoided exposure to the sun. Despite serving in the Navy, Rose could not swim. Despite living in Hawaii when married to her Marine ex-husband, Rose never went to the beach. Rose did like to jog. I didn't, but I did it to keep in shape for an occasional 10k race. I had always been close to my family. Rose didn't know what it was like to have parents. All she knew were in-laws, and she didn't desire any more exposure on that front. I reason we had little in common beyond living in the same town, attending the same university, and going to the same church.

I don't even know how Rose ended up at my church. It was a considerable distance away. Besides, her daughter was enrolled in a Christian school at another Baptist church with lots to offer. It could be nothing short of divine appointment.

After more than two years of dating, Rose confronted me. Her memory of those events is somewhat different, but I recall Rose informing me that an old boyfriend was returning to town. She wanted to know where our relationship was going then and there. I choose to interpret the remainder of the conversation as Rose asking me to marry her. I was not really thinking that far ahead, but I loved Rose and thought I could bring stability to her troubled life. Despite our differences, we set our minds upon a relationship which would culminate in marriage. We still had a rather large looming problem. Rose was going to school on the GI Bill, and in less than a year, she'd owe Uncle Sam three years of service somewhere as an Army nurse. She had jumped from the Navy into the Army for better career opportunities as a military nurse. I, however, was still a few years away from earning my doctorate degree and would not be going anywhere anytime soon.

When Rose graduated, she received orders to report for duty in the San Francisco Bay area. We knew that carrying on a long distance relationship was against the odds. At the end of one year apart, we hastened a reunion by planning a wedding ceremony. Rose took care of invitations and her dress. I took care of the rest.

After two years of separation, Rose came back to Texas for an August wedding. The invitations had gone out long ago, however, Rose didn't quite get the dress thing taken care of. She was okay from the neck down, but the veil which was custom-made in Mexico didn't make the trip. Rose had her daughter, Angie, sewing extra beads on a store-bought substitute the night before the wedding. I wasn't upset at all about the window dressing, but I was concerned that the window might not show up. I got word she'd arrived at the church only five minutes prior to the scheduled ceremony. We got a late start on marriage, but it transpired. The service was great, and so was the reception -- the work of an expert planner. We had two songs at our wedding. I had written them both. One was a love song, the other a prayer. The words to the song of prayer had particular relevance to our relationship's survival through physical separation.

*Lord, I missed her today.
Keep with her I pray, and
One day we two will be
One, united in you,
Two hearts burnin' to do
All in the name of the Lord.
We will rejoice in your
Love, unbounded and true.
Praise, we lift it to you
In hope these things I pray,
All in the name of the
Lord, I missed her today
Keep with her I pray, and
One day we two will be
One, united in you,
Two hearts burnin' to do
All in the name of the Lord.
We will rejoice in your
Love ...*

I lacked about six months to receive my degree. Rose owed Uncle Sam an additional year. In lieu of a true honeymoon, I drove back to California with Rose and my step-daughter, Angie, now 16. After a week or so, I flew back to Texas to resume my studies. We were separated again. Although it would be short-lived, I wasn't sure when and where we would be able to initiate a life together under the same roof. As it turned out, it was almost one year to the date. Today, I tell Rose that the first year of marriage was the best.

Reflections

Have you ever been separated from someone you love very much? I have. God has. You see, God loves us all beyond measure, but we are separated from God by the smallest of sins. We are God's handiwork, and God wants nothing more than to be reunited with

us in this life and throughout eternity. John 3:16, probably the most quoted verse of the Bible, says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Aside from our relationship with God, the most important loving relationship we enter is with our spouse. Who is beside you, and what set of circumstances brought you together? Better yet, what kind of commitment do you have to that person? As my wife constantly reminds me, I have to love her. We took an oath before God. The breakup of a marriage is not just between two people, even when no children are involved. Can you break a contract with God? I can't. Perhaps, some of those getting married by a Justice of the Peace are doing so in the thought of excluding God. Surprise, the marriage contract is no less. The Bible cites marital unfaithfulness of a spouse as grounds for a divorce, but Malachi 2:16 says God hates divorce. For those who have experienced divorce, as has my wife, God is merciful. The churches of America are full of people just like you.

For those who are unmarried, don't be consumed by looking for a spouse. Singles are the most easily mobilized population for Christian service. No matter what our marital status, we should be in search of God's will. In doing so, your chances of finding a faithful lifemate will skyrocket. If we spend our time looking for a mate in nightclubs and bars, we greatly increase the work before us to separate the wheat from the chaff, assuming there is any grain in those establishments beyond the pretzels.

5 What To Do

I had been interviewing on campus through the placement center the fall semester after getting married. I was able to see most of the recruiters who came to interview for chemical engineers with Ph.D.'s. Not many came. Silicon Valley was going through a correction period. The chemical industry was depressed. The Graham-Ruudman Bill was responsible for a freeze at all the national laboratories. The price of oil was taking the biggest nose dive in modern history. Then the call came from a government-affiliated laboratory out of Livermore, California, just a short drive from where Rose worked in the San Francisco Bay area. The job description was a perfect match. The puzzle pieces appeared to be falling into place.

I arranged for an interview trip, went, and returned, confident that I had made a good impression. In the next couple of weeks, I was left hanging. I had heard stories about companies wanting to see who was really interested in a job. Follow up conversations could certainly be construed as showing sincere interest, so I decided to call up the fellow that was responsible for bringing me out there. I mustered all the courage I could manage just to terminate the call with dignity after the person on the other end of the line said that they'd found a better match for the position. I wasn't worried, just depressed. I couldn't help thinking that God set things up for me, and I somehow with this free will thing blew my opportunity.

A few weeks passed before I received a call from a representative of a major oil company. I'd interviewed on campus with one of their representatives. I recall walking out of the campus interview thinking that was one of my most awkward experiences ever. The interview was frustrating, and seemingly pointless. I had little opportunity to discuss my qualifications, as the interviewer was interested in minute details of unimportant tasks. Despite, my own expectations, I received a follow-up telephone call. Another guy

from the same company was coming into town and wanted to take me out to dinner. That evening, I was as relaxed as someone on the hot seat can get, I suppose.

Shortly thereafter, I was contacted by that company's employee relations staff about a possible interview trip. I really didn't want to work for an oil company. You see, I had plenty of exposure to oil company representatives who didn't paint a very attractive picture to a young, reserved, Christian engineer. Our university research program had sizable industrial sponsorship, mostly from oil companies. Each year, we'd put on a review of our progress and invite sponsors to come. The meetings had a loyal following. Although there were a few bright, articulate fellows, sensitive to the life and experiences of the graduate student and the need for mentoring relationships, there were a handful of rivals who delighted in placing themselves and their company logo centerstage. The ego battle often had graduate student casualties. These people with suits and ties would even enter shouting matches. I don't think I ever attended a meeting without hearing obscenities being traded, as if this were the mode to strengthen a technical position. I, too, had to make presentations to this audience -- something I was truly scared to do, but I survived. Oil companies had a tainted reputation in my books from the onset.

Alas, my job options were dwindling, so I made the trip. Over the next month, I made trips to Tulsa and Los Angeles, also to talk with oil companies. These weren't my only leads though, because I also went to Louisiana and Tennessee concerning positions with chemical companies. Meanwhile, the price of oil was sliding fast, and taking my job opportunities with it.

The people in California really wanted me. That felt good. They very quickly made me an offer of employment. I reflected back on my descent into the Los Angeles area on my on-site visit. I'd never seen brown air before. That image was difficult to shake. As it turns out, the offer was really low, sort of diffusing their verbal praise. I knew what a competitive salary was, and that wasn't

close. With the California cost of living, I knew that I could not accept such an offer. Finally, I was forced to make a decision. The California company had instituted a hiring freeze. They called me to assure me that they could squeeze me under the wire, but I had to accept their offer pronto -- like during the same telephone conversation. I let the job go unfilled.

The people in Louisiana wanted me too. The job was more what I was trained to do as an undergraduate. The company appeared to want Ph.D. level people just to raise the caliber of personnel. That is an admirable position as an employer, but I simply wasn't impressed. I'd also never seen swampland before I was escorted from my hotel in town to the physical plant site. I was learning to appreciate Texas at record pace. The company wanted to send me to their headquarters for a follow-up interview with the upper management. I knew this meant that I was their prime candidate for the position. A couple of days after being given the name of the contact in North Carolina to call to set up the second trip, I dialed the number. I relayed the message that after some careful thought, I did not want the Louisiana job. I thought that there was no sense wasting the company's time and money any longer. Even though my options were thinning, my patience was not.

I then received an offer from the first oil company. In the end, this was my only card left on the table. I accepted the offer, and set a starting date. I informed Rose that she needed to pack her bags for a move back to Texas -- that is, when Uncle Sam was finished with her.

The day after I reported to work, my employer announced a hiring freeze. I started with an oil company under the worst economic conditions for that industry in modern times. Although I was naive about my circumstances, I knew that I wasn't in this city by accident. But was it the job or something else that brought me there? I'd spend years contemplating that one. Meanwhile, six months into my new job, the company announced it would undertake sizable layoffs. Ten years and three rounds of layoffs

later, I was still one of the employed. I remarked to others that I was the sole fixture in our organization. Everything just keeps changing around me. I'd basically been in the same group, addressing the same R&D issues, but I'd had five first line managers, seen six section managers, educated four division managers, and experienced three company name changes. Throughout it all, I tried to do good work, since the Bible says we should work as unto the Lord, but I still wonder what I was doing there. What great work awaited me there, if any? Perhaps, I'd already done it. Who knows? God knows!

Reflections

Jesus was 30 before initiating his 3 year public ministry that would lead him to a Roman cross. Like his earthly father, Jesus was a carpenter. Jesus was part of the work force just like you and me. Can you imagine the craftsmanship which must have gone into a piece of furniture or a home built by Jesus? Jesus knew about foundations, as evidenced by his parable found in *Matthew 7:24-27*.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Jesus knew what it was like to put in a hard day's work. He knew what it was to put forth your best effort. One day Jesus exchanged his tool belt for a band of loyal followers. Jesus was a carpenter, a

teacher, a poet, a priest, a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant, a judge. Jesus was a motivational speaker, a consultant, a cook, a waiter, a weatherman, a servant, a winemaker, a student, a fisherman, a caterer, and is now our mediator with God, the Father.

Does your present job honor God? Why do you do what you do? In this revolving door job climate, we need to stop and ask ourselves:

- Why am I here?
- Is there anything else I should be doing?
- Have I positioned myself for what God has in store for me next?

6 My Miracle Baby

I found myself in the foyer of Plano General Hospital. Rose's water broke in the wee hours of the morning, and we drove the short distance to the hospital after she convinced me to get out of bed. I did manage to get in a few more hours of sleep -- waiting for the contractions to get serious. After retiring from the baby business for 17 years, my wife wanted me to experience fatherhood. However, it was made perfectly clear that this was the end of the line. We knew that we were to have a girl. The amniocentesis told us that long ago. There were to be no surprises. I had no say-so whatsoever as to the baby's name. It was to be Courtney Rae Hazlett.

At 7 cm dilation, Rose requested drugs, and off we went to the normal delivery room. Just prior to giving up our pleasant apartment style birthing room, I made a final telephone call to our insurance carrier. You see, Rose wanted a tubal ligation. The insurance company, however, would apparently rather pay for baby after baby. I gave them one last chance to change their collective minds, but alas, all was in vain. As a man of few resources, I reluctantly informed Rose and the medical staff that we would settle for one medical procedure today. The doctor couldn't get to her tubes. It seems there was a baby in the way. So, we had a baby girl.

A couple of years later, the 94th General Hospital was called to active duty service. Someone named Saddam was causing a little trouble. Courtney was three years old--just out of diapers. I was relieved because Pampers and Huggies didn't make any larger sizes. Courtney was indeed a big baby. At the age of two weeks, Courtney was still under her birth weight, so the doctor told us we needed to supplement mother's milk with formula. By the age of three months, Courtney had ballooned and continued to be a little hefty for her age, despite the use of diluted formula from that

point on. Anyway, we shipped Rose off to Germany for an undetermined time period. I was a single parent. We managed. We led highly structured lives.

I specifically recall the day we said goodbye. We drove Rose out to the reserve center. A large number of chartered buses were on hand. All reservists, now active duty personnel, were to be transported by bus from Dallas to San Antonio, where they'd catch a departing flight to Frankfurt. The word was that Rose's unit would be filling in for regular active duty personnel in hospitals throughout Europe who were displaced into the Gulf region. We knew, however, that there were no guarantees. Casualties were expected -- lots of them. Word spread that 50,000 body bags had been shipped. A bloody war with poison gas and biological weapons in use was anticipated. One looming question remained. Did Saddam have access to a nuclear arsenal?

There we were, dropping Rose off at the reserve center. I remember being in a hurry. Rose gave Courtney and I a small kiss, turned with duffel bags across each shoulder, and walked off. We believe we caught a glimpse of her through a window as the buses pulled away, but it may have been wishful thinking. It wasn't the kind of goodbye I'd expected. It wasn't like the Hollywood movies where couples needed to be pried apart. There were no lingering kisses. Just like that, it was over. I didn't know if I'd ever see Rose again. I drove home with Courtney feeling quite empty.

Two months later, the war was over. When Rose was to arrive home after six months of deployment, debriefing was to take place in San Antonio. I bought a video camera just to capture the reunion moment -- another disappointment. Courtney and I drove from Dallas to San Antonio for the big reunion. We arrived outside the compound where Rose had indicated she was staying. I cranked up the video camera to capture what surely was to be a dramatic moment. Courtney yelled at me all the way up the corridor to stop the video camera. When the two did greet one

another, there was very little emotion. It was like Rose had just been away for a weekend, but I knew better.

We wanted to attend the decommissioning ceremony the next day. We checked into a motel for that night, since there were no vacancies at the military guest quarters. My parents were to drive down from Austin to attend as well. The next morning we arrived at the appointed time and place only to find out that the location had changed as well as the time. The ceremony was already over. So much for pomp and circumstance. Rose was disappointed to have missed the send off, but she was free to leave the base and her unit, so we headed for home.

After returning, Rose was technically still on the active duty roster for two additional weeks. At this time she began to inquire about receiving a tubal ligation while under free medical care benefits from the military. I can't recall what went wrong, but time ran out.

Meanwhile, we scheduled a trip to Hawaii for later that summer. It was to be sort of a family vacation to celebrate the homecoming. Time passed quickly, and we were in Honolulu before we knew it. We had a friend on Oahu who let us stay in his single bedroom condo for two weeks. Major Lawrence Chang was a wonderful friend. Rose was his nurse when he came into the base hospital in San Francisco for eye surgery. Mr. Chang was legally blind, diabetic, and handicapped -- so he told us. He was a Pearl Harbor survivor. Mr. Chang was a survivor. His wife had died a few years previous. He had no children. He had alienated the majority of his living relatives, but he had his friends. He kept a condo and a car available for any friend who wanted to come visit him in Hawaii. We took Major Chang up on his offer.

Oh, we also invited my step-daughter, Angie, to go with us. We had fun, but we had no privacy in our one bedroom guest quarters. As the time drew near for the vacation to end, Angie was suddenly stricken with fever blisters around her mouth. Her bouts with Herpes simplex B were usually brought on by stress and always

required a good dose of antibiotics to clear up. Though it was getting late one evening, she insisted upon driving to the nearest medical clinic to see a doctor and get a prescription. That evening, after Courtney was asleep, was our one and only romantic encounter in Hawaii. Only God knows what stressful event brought on Angie's illness while on a relaxing tropical escape.

The following month, Rose insisted on having the tubal ligation -- insurance or no insurance. I had dropped Rose off in the morning at the hospital for her outpatient surgery. She had gone by the day before for her pre-op laboratory tests. There was nothing I could do, so I went on to work. I was depressed. That was truly the end of the line. Short of adoption, there would be no more babies. About two hours later, I received a phone call at work. It was Rose. She said that the surgery had been canceled due to something which showed up on one of her lab tests. Rose told me she was pregnant. I was filled with joy but scared, knowing how much Rose never wanted to go through childbearing again. Rose had a tough time carrying Courtney. She had developed Carpal Tunnel Syndrome in her wrists during the final couple of months and experienced a great deal of pain. Of course, maternal age was always a risk factor.

At that point, I prayed that the baby would be another girl. Rose went on record that she wanted no boys. We lucked out with Courtney. Knowing that we would find out the baby's sex long before delivery, I feared for Rose's emotional well-being should she be forced to carry a boy for several months following the genetics screening.

Rose began to get very large. About four months into the pregnancy, Rose was diagnosed with gestational diabetes. Several weeks of attempted dietary control were in vain. Rose graduated to insulin injections. She even had me giving her shots -- something I never thought I would or could do. We went through the battery of tests given to older mothers. Everything checked out okay, but we were going to have a son. Rose was enormous, and

we were told just the week before her due date that the baby would be over nine pounds as a result of the unchecked diabetes.

Finally, the day came. Just as with Courtney, it all began with Rose's water breaking. Labor contractions were small, slow, and irregular. The doctor initiated pitocin to speed things up a bit. The doctor watched the fetal monitor intently. The baby's heartbeat indicated stress, and the decision was made to take the baby by C-section. I wasn't sure that I could handle observing the procedure at my wife's side, but I summoned what courage I could.

When Creighton was delivered, his umbilical chord was found to be wrapped around his neck twice. But Creighton made it. He beat the odds. God strung together an unbelievable series of events to produce a new life -- poor insurance, a modern-age war, a scheduling problem, a Hawaiian vacation, a bout of fever blisters, a canceled tubal ligation, a struggle against diabetes, a stress test, a C-section, an umbilical noose. I know that God has a special plan for Creighton, because Creighton is my miracle baby.

Reflections

Psalm 127:3

Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him.

Life is fragile. New life is a miracle. The fact that it happens so frequently has reduced the miraculous to the ordinary, the common. Genesis tells us we are fashioned in God's image. Exactly what that means has been a subject of debate by theologians for centuries, but it does elevate mankind over the rest of creation. I'm sure God agonizes over one abortion more than the plight of all the whales and baby seals. Which cause is more apt to stir your emotions?

Do you know the circumstances of your own miraculous entry into this world? I encourage you to find out in as much detail as possible. In the same vein, parents, tell your children how precious and special they are. By relating the details leading up to their entry into this world, you will be setting the stage for their own sense of purpose and self-worth.

Many churches today have baby dedication ceremonies. These are more for the parents than the kids, as parents are challenged to make a commitment to their child. If you are a parent, what commitments have you made to your children? A generation is emerging with little or no commitment between parent and child. Make sure you are an exception. When he/she is old enough, make them aware of your covenant. Your child will have a head start on all his/her peers which will pave the way to success.

7 Unconditional Love

When we had Courtney, Rose, Angie, and I were living in an all adult apartment complex. We figured you can hide a baby just so long. In the Old Testament, Moses' family found they could hide him no more than about three months before resorting to placing him in the basket boat and casting him out among the reeds of the Nile for Pharaoh's daughter to find. We thought it prudent to begin a search for another place to live. We wanted a house to give us more room. After a long, unsuccessful search process, we basically ran out of time and had to settle for something less than we wanted.

When it came time to close, it was discovered that some paperwork hadn't been filed. When I approached the apartment leasing office about getting a one month extension, I was informed that our unit had, in fact, already been leased. We had to vacate. Fortunately, the owner of the home was willing to go ahead and let us move in, since she had already moved out with the exception of a few items she kept in the back part of the house.

The home had a huge back yard. We had a 4.5 pound Chihuahua which went wild with so much space to roam. A few hours after moving in though, Max, our Chihuahua, was nowhere to be found. Max was a gift by my brother-in-law to my step-daughter. When Rose left Texas for her three-year military assignment after graduating from nursing school, Max came to live with me. I later took him back to Angie on one of my many trips to California. Max was not real smart, but he was cute -- ugly cute. Max would come sit in my lap. I'd place him inside my jacket. He liked it there, so secure and warm. As are most Chihuahuas, Max was hyperactive. He shivered in a nervous sort of way.

Still, for such a little dog, Max could make some noise. He was a good watchdog. Why, when we were living in the apartment, Max

chased away a would-be burglar. Max was locked up in the bathroom, but the guy who broke our window to enter the apartment didn't know that. It was a good thing, because if he'd have been able to see what was making all the racket, he probably would have been nabbed by the police, stricken with a case of uncontrollable laughter. This was no laughing matter though. Max was missing.

Max found a hole in the fence. Any other time, I wouldn't have been concerned. Max had gone on unscheduled strolls before and always returned. This time was different. He didn't know where home was. I patrolled the entire neighborhood, but it is hard to spot a black 4.5 pound Chihuahua, especially if he is not ready to be found. I felt sick. I think it was the next day when a neighbor came over carrying Max. He had eaten supper and spent the night at the neighbor's house. I was so relieved. I quickly blocked all possible future routes of escape.

The lady that sold us the home was the original owner. She and her husband, now deceased, had built this custom home in the late fifties. Parting with the home and the memories were difficult for her. She asked if she could remain in the back part of the home while she continued to sift through the final remaining items not yet moved. We figured that since she was nice enough to let us move in early, we'd let her stay late. I think about a month passed before she was ready to leave for good.

There are good things and bad things about owning an older home. I found most of the good things. Rose was quick to tally the bad. I was certainly kept busy sprucing up the place. Rose was quick to keep my To-Do list full. Occasionally, I had to do things which I thought didn't need to be done at all, just to keep the peace. Refinishing all the kitchen cabinets was one such chore. One thing was beyond dispute, we had the space we desired. Why, Baby Courtney had her own room with refinished hardwood floors and fresh pink paint. We were unprepared for what we were about to experience.

Rose was home tending to Courtney when she noticed something frighteningly unusual. There was a man in our back yard with half his body sticking inside our kitchen window. This intruder had removed the screen, raised the window, and was literally fishing for my wife's purse with a stick he had picked up in the backyard. Rose confronted the man, retreated to call 911, then whisked Courtney out the front door to a neighbor's home. The man had indeed hooked the purse and was long gone by the time the police arrived. We found out later that he had actually entered the back part of the home through another window and made off with a television set prior to the kitchen incident. The policeman's comments scared us more. He said that thieves often return.

Canceling all the credit cards was a real hassle, but we had one laugh on the robber. That television he stole, it didn't work! The picture tube had gone out. It received audio, but that's all. Sitting right next to the unit he took was one in working order. He'd think twice before coming back to our house. He risked going to prison for a few dollars from my wife's purse and a broken TV. We weren't worth the effort, though that is a sad commentary on our financial picture.

We decided that we weren't going to sit around waiting to be victims again. That same week, I had a security alarm system installed to give us a little peace of mind. We also decided that perhaps we needed more of a deterrent than poor little Max. Rose asked around. She accepted the advice of friends that a female Rottweiler would be ideal. We did a little searching through the paper and responded to one of the many ads. The person we contacted had one dog left, a female, the runt of the litter. The dog had a terrific pedigree. Since it was the last dog, and the owners were anxious to get out of dog sales, we were offered a bargain price, \$400. That was \$200 off the list price for models that had already left the showroom floor. That was a lot of money for a dog, in my opinion, but Rose wanted it. We got it.

We named the dog Queen Esther of Chez. Chez was either the owner's name or the mother's name. I can't recall which. Esther was Courtney's dog. They grew up together. Courtney could pull on Esther's ears, tail, whatever, and Esther never ever got upset. Esther got into plenty of trouble. She was a ninety pound puppy. Rose would take Esther jogging. I could no longer go with her. Someone had to stay with Courtney. Esther was Rose's dog. I got the lion's share of the responsibilities that accompany having a pet: feeding, bathing, training, cleaning up after. Esther was my dog.

Boy could Esther protect the property, too! Unlike the situation with a pinned up Max barking fearlessly while shaking at the same time, you only had to hear Esther bark to know a real dog was on watch. Why, Esther was even able to call for backup. On a number of occasions, we had unsolicited visits from the police, the fire department, and emergency medical services. Each time they were responding to a dispatch to our address. I was ready to disengage our home alarm system, since these community service organizations were threatening to fine us for false alarms. Then it occurred to me, "Could Esther be pushing the keypad buttons?" In a state of disbelief, I installed a Plexiglas cover over the hallway keypad. The panic mode dispatches abruptly stopped. Esther was chief of security. No one had to know that she would not hurt a fly.

Just as Max was able to find a weakness in the perimeter, Esther too tested the aged wooden fence out back and found an escape route. After a couple of unsuccessful patch jobs, it became obvious that the wooden fence had to go. I also knew that a dog that is able to breach a fence will try again. I bought the necessary supplies from a local do-it-yourself store to replace that old wooden fence with a chain link one. It was tough work, but I got all the holes dug and posts cemented on one weekend. When the next weekend rolled around, I had to knock down the old fence and get the new one up in a single day. Otherwise, the backyard bathroom breaks for both dogs had to be supervised. I got the job

done with the exception of the gate. When assembling it, I noticed that I was missing bolts to secure the latch. It was getting dark, and I didn't have the bolts, so I called it quits until I could make a run on the hardware store on Saturday. To semi-secure the area, I draped a line of chain link across the front of the latchless gate and placed some barriers in front of it. Later that evening, as I sat in my green recliner, Esther came up and ran her head under my hand.

On Saturday morning, I was slow to rise. I guess all the physical activity had left me pretty well drained. When I did get up, Rose had already beaten me to the breakfast table. A few minutes had pasted when we heard gunshots at close range. We knew that sound well. The police were constantly being summoned to a nearby apartment complex. Gunfire was a common occurrence, but not during daylight, and not this close. We heard a whole series of shots, five or six in all. Rose asked me to look for Esther. As I was always the one to let her outside in the mornings, I assumed she was inside in the hallway where she slept. Then Rose told me that she had let Esther out into the backyard already. I went out back. Esther was nowhere to be found. Rose went out the front door and began screaming for me to come. Esther was lying dead on our neighbor's front lawn.

It seems that our neighbor had sent his son out to get the morning paper. His son reported a big dog running loose. The father went to see for himself and said Esther made a move in his direction. He immediately went back inside and retrieved a shotgun. Whether enticed to approach or not, the neighbor was able to get Esther in his sights at the edge of his lawn. He was seemingly proud of himself as he stated he shot and shot until the dog no longer moved.

Rose screamed at the man over and over again. Meanwhile, Courtney looked on from our front porch. I didn't know what to say either to Rose or the man so ready and willing to use deadly force against his neighbor's pet. I was in a state of disbelief. Rose

asked me to bring Esther home, so we could bury her in the backyard. Esther's pellet riddled body was too heavy for me to carry the entire distance. Rose told me to just drag her body the rest of the way. I struggled to do even that. I had been there before.

Rose was six months pregnant at the time carrying Creighton. I was very concerned about her and the baby as she insisted on digging the grave. Only upon reaching complete exhaustion did she allow me control over the shovel to finish the job. Courtney stood at the back door and watched. As emotions ran high, I'm glad we did not own a gun for the neighbor's sake. Courtney was invited to come outside as we said a few words over the gravesite. We spoke of Esther's gentle spirit and her unconditional love displayed in those two years with us. Then Rose when back into the house to tend to Courtney, while I filled the grave.

To this day we don't know for sure how Esther escaped. She may have, in fact, bypassed the barricade job. I cannot rule it out. I later made the trip to the fix-it shop to finish the job on the fence, although it was no longer a priority. I thought the time for shedding tears had passed, but as I surveyed the parts in the hardware section, my heart sank. The store was now selling the latches with all the accessories needed, including my missing bolts. I cried all the way home and more. Perhaps this nightmare need not have happened.

We sought legal counsel, but we were disillusioned by a system which only allowed us to seek monetary compensation. We told our Christian lawyer that all we really wanted was an apology. He drafted a letter for us stating that we would pursue no further action if we received an apology. None ever came. None of any kind.

Courtney also had some unresolved conflict of her own. Soon thereafter, Courtney began exhibiting some strange behaviors. She never wanted to be alone for any length of time. I couldn't even

mow the lawn without taking her outside with me if Rose wasn't home. We took Courtney to a number of sessions with a psychologist affiliated with one of the most prestigious Christian counseling centers. In his course of therapy for separation anxiety, he said the triggering event might be useful information, but treatment would focus on exhibited symptoms and coping behaviors. There was no real need to deal with the root cause. Courtney got better, but I don't know if any of us will be able to bury the feelings that were exposed that painful February 1 morning.

Reflections

Tragedy brings out the best and the worst in us. How are you ready to react? Greek tragedies had a number of things in common. There was always a victim, and the victim always suffered from a fatal character flaw. Oh, the flaw needed not be a trait we'd consider dishonorable. In fact, it could even be an unwavering trust or an unconditional love. In the case of Esther, a string of events had to take place for her to lose her life in a brutal, unjustifiable manner that day. The pain for us comes not necessarily in reliving the what-ifs, but in recalling the love she showed for us. We let her down.

God loves us unconditionally -- all of us, Christian and non-Christian. It is only that the Christian has responded to that love in obedience. We learn in the gospel of John 15:9-14 the words of Jesus,

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have

loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.

Jesus, of course, did lay down his life for his friends, you and me. This would be nothing more than a tragedy if not for who Jesus was and why he chose to go to the cross. Jesus was not a martyr. Martyrs are men and women who die unjustly for a cause. Jesus was crucified unjustly. He refused to call down legions of angels to rescue him from the cross because he, indeed, had a mission to accomplish. Jesus is not a martyr, because Jesus lives. The God of the universe sent his son Jesus into this world to show the extent of his love for us. Have you acknowledged this display of God's love?

We should experience a separation anxiety when we fail to see God with us. We should be panic stricken when faced with acting on our own accord. Often we save God for when we really need him, as if we had an exhaustive supply of his love. Share the view of the psalmist. Call upon God to be your refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Unlike the therapist whose goal was to suppress the anxiety which comes through physical separation from a loved one, our desire should be to bind ourselves to God and to suppress the temptations that could part us from fellowship with him. What are you anxious about? The God who formed this universe from nothingness, the God who assembled the atom, the God who breathed life into a lump of inert clay, the God who fashioned your DNA, this God loves YOU unconditionally. Will you return that love?

8 Not Another Dog Story!

After Esther's brutal slaying, we decided to get another Rotweiler. It couldn't be just any Rotweiler though. We wanted one just as nice and lovable as Esther. We contacted the family that sold us Esther only to be informed that Esther's litter was the last. Esther's mom had been spayed. We looked up the other half of the family tree to find a thriving Rotweiler breeding/training business. These dogs were all trained for show, not for guard duty. We were delighted to find out a litter of puppies sired by Esther's brother was due any day. We about keeled over when we were quoted the whopping price of \$750 for a female. There was not much to think about though. We were beyond thinking. That dog was going to bring us some peace of mind. We couldn't have Esther back, but we could provide a home for a close relative.

The puppies came. We were so excited, we wanted a glimpse at our 2-day-old puppy.. When we arrived at the house, we were greeted by Esther's father. He was a stately, retired champion showdog. The lady of the house took us back to where the mother dog was tending to her young. We were told a bit of disheartening news. Only two puppies survived the night. The mother had inadvertently slept atop some of her young. We wrote a check for the puppy we would name Sarah. That was the name Courtney had chosen for her little sister, had she had a little sister instead of Creighton. We were told to come back in six weeks to bring Sarah home after she was weaned from her mother.

Sarah grew quickly. She never could take her aunt's place. Sarah was rougher with the kids. She wasn't as smart. We took her for obedience training. The instructor said Sarah was one of her most difficult cases. We loved her anyway. She carried all her aunt's memories in a single glance.

One day, a small black and white puppy appeared in our carport. We thought he must belong to the neighbor next door. The following day, the puppy was back. Maybe he hadn't even gone anywhere to come back from. Courtney wanted to keep him. I said he belonged to someone, not us. Rose and Courtney put some food and milk out for the puppy. To no one's surprise, he was still hanging around on the third day. It was then that I agreed we could bring the puppy into the back yard for his own safety while we sought out the rightful owners. I made a sign and posted it in our front yard: Black and White Puppy Found Here. We had not one inquiry. After two weeks, I reluctantly withdrew the sign from our yard.

We were now in search of a name, since we owned a second dog by default. He reminded me of the dog in the movie "The Nightmare Before Christmas" -- nothing but skin, bones, and a tail. Thus, we dubbed our adopted puppy, Zero. That mutt ate everything in sight. Zero fit the profile we had heard about in foster parent training. Kids who were not offered three regular meals a day in their parental setting often gorged themselves at the first opportunity in their foster parent home. Not knowing when or from where their next meal would come birthed a famine-feast mentality. Without regard to manners at mealtime, Zero ate and grew and grew. We didn't know what kind of dog Zero was, but the options were dwindling as he outgrew breed after breed. Our attention quickly turned to prohibiting mutt puppies between Sarah and Zero -- royalty and the homeless.

I called the local, government-subsidized clinic which had a charter to help control the pet population. They offered low-cost spay-neuter services. I made an appointment to bring Zero in for daypatient surgery. The day of Zero's appointment, it rained like cats and dogs. I had Courtney with me in the passenger seat. Zero was latched to one of the built-in hooks in the bed of the Jeep. I knew roughly where the clinic was located, but I proceeded slowly down the well-traveled road, still in the midst of a downpour. We came upon the clinic, and I realized that I would

have to make an unprotected left turn across three lanes of traffic. As the light downstream turned red, I saw an opportunity to negotiate my way across the motionless lanes of traffic. The cars were more than accommodating as we crossed one, two, three lanes of bumper-to-bumper cars. It was only then that I realized, "Oh, here's a fourth lane that popped up as a right turn only lane." My view down that lane was obscured by a large transport truck. I waited a few seconds without seeing any cars whatsoever using that lane. I decided to shoot across. I gave it some gas, then saw something coming at unavoidably high speed. I quickly transferred my foot from gas to brake, but impact was imminent. In a blur, we saw a commercial catering truck pass directly in front of us. We barely felt a thing, but the truck decapitated our Jeep. Bumper, headlights, grill -- everything in front of the radiator was a good fifty feet up the road.

I believe an angel of God saved us that day. After all, protecting the saints is the angelic responsibility. One second deeper into that lane of traffic would have landed Courtney and I in the hospital if not in the morgue. I'd never heard of, seen, or experienced such a benign, high-impact accident. Our Jeep limped across that fourth lane into the parking lot of our destination. The truck driver backtracked to our location. We went inside the clinic to get out of the rain, exchange information, and make the necessary phone calls to insurance, towing company, and ride service (home).

After parting business with the truck driver and before opening business with the tow truck operator, I decided to go get the dog out of the car. At least I was going to accomplish my mission of the morning. I ran to the car and back to avoid the rain. I don't know why, because my clothes were already saturated. As Zero entered the building, he noticed something I hadn't. There was a mirror set up at dog eye level in the front hallway. Zero barked profusely at the other dog just a few feet away. I don't know why, but the proprietors thought Zero's behavior unusual. They refused to take him. The assistant also added that Zero had mange around his eyes. I saw no mange. I reasoned with them that he was just in

an automobile accident, he was all wet, and he saw his reflection for the first time. Logical argument or not, we left the clinic with everyone's genitalia intact. Meanwhile, Rose had arrived to give us a ride back home.

I contemplated letting troublesome Zero run free then and there. We'd given him a home. We were trying to do the responsible thing. I was just told by people that handle huge numbers of dogs that Zero had mange and exhibited unusually aggressive behavior. Rose calmly said, "No let's bring him home, and I'll make him an appointment to see our regular veterinarian." That's exactly what we did.

The lady at the vet's office chuckled when Rose gave her Zero's name. "Zero!", she laughed, "...More like six-million-and-one." Our vet gave him the necessary surgery and initiated a series of six, \$30 mange therapy baths. Later, we found out that Zero had heartworms. Administering the cyanide medication for this condition used to be quite risky, but a new, safer treatment was now available for about \$400. We coughed up the funds for that procedure too. Suddenly, Zero was an expensive dog. He was the equal in value to the Rotweiller at home in our back yard.

A remarkable transformation has now taken place. The mutt that ate everything in sight has become a picky eater. He no longer gobbles the entire contents of his bowl in three seconds flat. He often walks away from his bowl, leaving food behind. He knows his every need will be provided. He knows that another meal will come. He knows he is loved. He knows he has a permanent home.

Reflections

Zero was brought from the streets and elevated to the status of royalty. As Christians, we too have been brought from a depraved state and been given a seat at the King's Table. That dog went

from zero to infinity. We, too, can rest assured that God will provide our every need. We are children of the King. Why should you choose to live otherwise? God doesn't give us what we deserve, and He generously gives us what we don't deserve. You are not your own. You were bought with a price. None is more valuable. None is more loved. Check out Philippians 4:19, "And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." Rest in our eternal reward as promised to God's children in Romans 8:16-17, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

9 The Paper Parent

Our baby factory had closed up shop, but as a family, we felt that we could help children less fortunate than ours. Many of society's problems can be traced to adults living with childhood emotional scars. These scars can come from a variety of sources, but those who have lived in neglect or abusive situations are especially at risk. We decided to become foster parents. Actually, Rose decided to be a foster parent. I decided to support Rose's strong convictions.

We attended a number of seminars and workshops, all designed to equip the prospective foster parent with information and skills to handle the special needs child. Considerable time was required. The information was quite valuable, but we were ready for the application stage.

We had heard from social workers and experienced foster care providers that there was an optimum age of foster child for families with biological children at home. This age was typically a year or so younger than your oldest child. That suited Rose fine. She wanted to give a home to Hispanic toddlers, preferably girls. Having a nurse at home, however, made us candidates for a wide range of problem kids.

When the call came, we were surprised that the agency was speaking of a 13 year-old female prospect. It wasn't our expressed preference, but we were not going to refuse a child on those grounds. Perhaps Jennifer needed us.

Jennifer didn't seem to fit the profile of the kids described to us during foster parent training. Perhaps her problems were masked by the desire to be accepted. Regardless, Jennifer adjusted well. Her background leading to a foster parent relationship must remain confidential. Jennifer didn't have good study skills or

habits, but Jennifer was adapting well to her new home, school, and church. It felt quite strange, though, when she began calling Rose, Mom. Sometimes it was as if Jennifer was living in a fantasy world. Maybe it was her way of coping with problems no teenager should have to face.

It became evident that conditions for Jennifer's return to her own family were not being met. Jennifer did not seem to be particularly upset. Things seemed to be working out with us, so after some discussion, we voluntarily offered Jennifer our home and family for the duration. That probably meant Jennifer would stay with us until she reached the age of 18. Then she could go out on her own. We were, however, still in what was described to us during training as the honeymoon phase -- not particularly representative of the long term familial relationship. Perhaps we too were not facing reality. Perhaps we wanted Jennifer to fit in; therefore, we believed that she did fit in.

During the short time Jennifer was with us, she had made a profession of faith in her youth class at church and followed through in public baptism. She was eager to make new friends, and they came easily in her new environment. Jennifer went to youth camp that summer, and she thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Jennifer's personality was bubbly and contagious. Conceivably this too was a coping skill.

We had two events on the horizon that needed to be addressed. First, Rose was to go off somewhere for two weeks of active duty with the Army Reserves. Although I had "adequately" taken care of Courtney during Operation Desert Storm for a much longer period, Rose insisted that I was unable to handle three kids on my own. Rose made arrangements for a respite family stay for Jennifer for that two week interval. She had also made arrangements for someone to come clean and cook for us. The second event was our family vacation. We had been planning for a year to make a return trip to Hawaii. I had been carefully budgeting for the event, but the addition of Jennifer was not

anticipated. We were up front with the foster parent agency and Jennifer from day one that we didn't think we could afford to take Jennifer. It didn't seem to matter as long as the event was two months away.

I tried to put the pieces together which would allow us to take Jennifer with us to Hawaii, but I could not come up with a solution. Gift agencies didn't want to be seen giving away trips to Hawaii, even if it was for a foster child. We could not break out of our living paycheck to paycheck. I received a lot of sympathetic ears, but that's about all. As the time approached, Jennifer could sense from me that she would not be going with us. The tide quickly turned.

Jennifer went away for the two Army Reserve duty weeks to another foster home. It was supposedly a farm house with horses and such, a considerable distance from the city. When I called about making arrangement to pick up Jennifer, I was informed that Jennifer didn't want to leave. Apparently some encouragement was offered which led Jennifer to believe that it was possible for this temporary living situation to become permanent. This was never to be the case. The agency insisted that Jennifer be returned to us. If things could not be resolved, they would find another home for Jennifer.

Things were not resolved. We arranged for Jennifer to go on a mini-vacation of her own to my parents' home in Austin. They had a pool. My mom is a great cook. Austin is great for outdoor summer activity. Jennifer enjoyed herself there. When we returned from Hawaii, it was obvious that the relationship was beyond repair. After Jennifer insisted that she wanted to go to another home, even if she could not return to the respite family, we agreed that an alternative placement was the best solution. I was torn in two. I had made a commitment which fell just short of adoption, but now I had been rejected as a father.

Jennifer did leave us. The agency could find no other home for her, and they opted to place her back with the respite family. We never blamed Jennifer. She was an impressionable teenager who expressed a preference. Maybe I should have gone into debt to take her with us. Perhaps it would have made no difference. I am thankful that Jennifer received Jesus as her Lord and Savior while in our home. I must believe that was the extent of God's plan for our involvement in Jennifer's life.

All along I thought I was the strong parent, and Rose was the primary emotional center of the family. I learned from this experience that I was emotionally vulnerable. I could be twisted and torn emotionally like a piece of old newsprint. I was not the stoic rock of the family. I was a paper parent.

Reflections

People are hurt every day by the choices of others. Some are ready and willing to step on all others on their climb to a hollow, earthly measure of success. Some cheat on their spouse, thinking that it really doesn't affect their relationship to family at home. Some get behind the wheel after a few drinks or drags, thinking they can honor the thin centerline which preserves life on our streets and highways. All of these actions have consequences in this life and beyond.

God is often hurt by our choices. We displease God every time we sin. Sin bars us from fellowship with God, and it keeps us from receiving his full blessing. There is an unpardonable sin. That is when we reject the Holy Spirit's testimony that Jesus Christ is Lord. Imagine how God must feel when He is rejected as Father. God can give multiple opportunities, but we must not presume another chance will come our way. Let not your heart be hardened. Christian, you have a mission, do it while the vision is

fresh. Non-Christian, now is your chance to find God and add His joy and His meaning to this life.

10 What's In A Name

Since my college days, I've been in some sort of teaching role within the Southern Baptist Sunday School program. If there's anything Baptists do right, it's Sunday School. It is the Sunday School which fosters fellowship, trust, and openness to spiritual teaching. The Christian relationships which grow and develop within the Sunday School allow for true problem sharing and ministry within the body of believers. It is the Sunday School which implants the Word of God into young hearts and minds. It is the group Bible study within the Sunday School which lays a foundation for a lifetime.

My involvement in Sunday School leadership has been primarily with children. Children are worlds more teachable than adults. You can't get an adult to memorize a scripture verse! A child will not only memorize the verse more quickly, but the child will do it each and every week for the thrill of a sticker or check mark on a progress chart. I've given out many a sticker for reciting verses that I cannot say from memory.

For years, I was a director in a Spanish Sunday School Department for fourth through sixth graders. Our department was part of the church's bus ministry. The fact that I didn't know a lick of Spanish didn't seem to matter. What was important was that I was there -- consistently. I was not only a constant in the lives of our kids, but my wife, my children, and I visited them in their homes. We often found ourselves wandering around apartment complexes looking for some clue to the numbering system. It was not uncommon to spend 45 minutes scouting for an apartment for a 3 minute visit. I could not communicate at all with some of the parents, but as soon as I mentioned the name of the church, I was immediately welcomed. I often enlisted the children as interpreters. Those days were a challenge and a blessing.

Prior to the Spanish years, I taught second grade. This was a fun age to teach because the ability of the kids changed so drastically throughout the year. It can be a difficult age if there are not enough helpers. Second grade boys need a high teacher-student ratio. I hate to say it, but I've had classes where I hoped that certain boys, who caused untold disruption, would not show up each week. Sadly, these are the ones who needed to be there the most. Other classes were simply a delight to teach.

One of the more difficult times for me was always at the beginning of the year when a new batch of kids came through. It was a monumental chore for me to learn their names. It's hard to minister to someone on a personal level if they know you do not remember their name. We usually wore nametags. Second graders are rough on nametags. We found laminated cardstock to be the best, low-cost solution. It sure beats having to write names on thirty labels each week. Just punch a hole in the fishy's mouth, jam some yarn through there, tie her off, and voilà -- spill resistant, tear resistant, second grader resistant nametags. Still, there were nametag casualties. Fortunately, about the time the nametags started to disintegrate, we had most of the names down.

One particular year, I had a really great bunch of kids. They were easy to motivate and soaked in the activities like a sponge. Teaching plans were flexible, but one thing I always made time for was Bible verse memorization. It was important to keep track of the Bible verses learned, for at the end of each year, a pizza party was thrown for those achieving a milestone of 25 verses. That was usually enough motivation, but I wanted them to get the certificate that came along with their accomplishment. The certificates were always given out in an evening worship service with individual recognition before the church body. We used a chart to keep track of each student's progress. Some kids were more than happy to blurt out the verse for all to hear, while others would recite the verse of the day only in private. Each had their opportunity -- each in their own style.

I'm reaching back quite a few years, so I don't recall too many of those second graders by name. But I do remember little Samuel. Samuel began coming about mid-year. Samuel was a skinny black child who loved to talk. Actually, I think he loved for people to listen to him more than he liked to talk. Samuel's face lit up at a teacher's encouraging word. At Sunday School, Samuel received the positive feedback his soul needed. Samuel worked hard to earn the praises liberally showered upon him. Samuel was not the most gifted child, but not a Sunday went by when Samuel failed to say his memory verse. I noticed when Samuel was absent. I felt a tinge of disappointment when he would miss a class. Fortunately, that didn't happen very often. Before we knew it, the school year was over, and little Samuel went on to another class. I honestly wish I had been a true believer of home visits back then.

Another class came, and with it came another round of nametags. One Sunday well into the following year, as I was going down the stairs carrying supplies, I saw a former student going the opposite direction. It was Samuel. His face was aglow as his eyes met mine. You could see joy spread all across his face, as if meeting a best friend after a long separation. I recognized him immediately as a member of the previous year's class, but I could not remember little Samuel's name in order to greet him. He must have sensed it also, because he asked repeatedly, "What's my name? What's my name?" The greater the distance between us, the louder he pleaded for me to remember him. I felt awful. Samuel, then a third grader, was at the point of tears. We were swept in opposite directions by the flow of boys, girls, teachers, and parents, all using the stairwell. Very quickly we were out of each other's sight. In the time span of that chance encounter, I couldn't recall his name. I know Samuel was crushed that day because a teacher he admired had 'forgotten' him. Unfortunately, I never got another chance at redemption, for that was the last time I saw Samuel. I wanted little Samuel to know God never forgets, nor does He disappoint.

Reflections

What's in a name? Genealogy is a fad these days. I say fad, but is it really? Calling something a fad implies that it will eventually go out of vogue. In contrast, people throughout time have been interested in their own heritage. They don't care to learn too much about someone else's family, but they are keenly interested in their own lineage -- their direct ancestors. Correspondingly, people often skip Bible reading passages in Genesis, Chronicles, and elsewhere when they come to all the "begats". We think it boring to read never-ending lists of unfamiliar names, most of which we can't even properly pronounce. I admit to scanning through such passages, but my eyes stick every time I come across a name I know something about. We use names to recall an embodiment of thoughts, feelings, facts, and experiences we associate with a person.

I'm proud of the heritage in my name, as I'm sure you are too. A particular source of pride is a first or middle name which has been passed down through the family. The last name is kind of obligatory. Have you been named after someone who has gone before you? My middle name, Doyle, is my grandfather's middle name. He went by Doyle rather than his given first name, Ulmer. I don't blame him. My mother's middle name is Doylene. I wonder where that came from? She wouldn't like for me to reveal her given first name. I don't blame her either. No one in our family would want any of their ancestors' first names, but we have sort of a tradition started with this middle name thing. I have passed this tradition on regarding my son, Creighton Doyle Hazlett. Perhaps you have been given a unique first and middle name. There is a certain charm about that also. Regardless, our name conjures up images of who we are in the eyes of others. In this sense, there is power in a small cluster of letters.

On the other hand, the Bible tells us there is true power in the name of God and in the name of His son, Jesus. Why, the formal name of God was never spoken in olden times out of reverence and fear. Commandment number three warns us to not misuse the name of God. Today, we can't walk down street, see a movie, or turn on the television without hearing the names of God and Jesus used alongside vulgar expressions. Our society has devalued God and Jesus by allowing such usage to become commonplace. The last part of Exodus 20:7 says, "... for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." Deuteronomy 28:58 also carries a stern warning, "If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name -- the Lord your God -- the Lord will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters, and severe and lingering illnesses." I wonder which plagues, disasters, and lingering illnesses we witness are a result of God honoring this cause-result relationship.

In order to remind us of the power and prominence of the name of Jesus, I cite the following sprinkle of verses. John 16:23b says, "... I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my *name* ." We're also told in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other *name* under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Romans 10:13 gives us those reassuring words, "... Everyone who calls on the *name* of the Lord will be saved." Philippians 2:9-11 states, "Therefore God exalted him [Christ Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the *name* that is above every *name* , that at the *name* of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Let's elevate God's name to its rightful place of holiness. Let's trust God's Word for the saving power in the Lord's name. Earnestly call upon His name which is above every name. Do it and you will find your name in the Lamb's Book of Life.

1 1 The Diamond Tree

Since about our eighth wedding anniversary, my wife, Rose, had been warning me in no uncertain terms that she expected a good present for our 10th anniversary. I'd stopped giving her gifts long ago. She never liked anything I gave her. Why, I recall the time I bought her favorite perfume, Joy. I knew I couldn't go wrong with a self-declared favorite luxury item, but I was wrong. Rose was upset with me for something the day I presented her gift, so she wanted to pour the perfume down the drain. I rescued the perfume and took it back to the store for my money back. Now I just give her cash and let her buy her own presents. I knew, however, that the 10th had to be special. I had to actually buy her something, and it had to be significant.

Rose soon let me know exactly what she expected, a diamond bracelet. I knew what she had in mind wasn't one of those mass-produced tennis bracelets. I knew that I'd have to save and skimp for a while to pull this one off. It just so happened that I finished paying off the car, but my credit union did not discontinue the monthly payroll deductions. To terminate the automatic electronic transfer required me to file some paperwork. This opportunity to be passive seemed to be a good way to set aside some extra dough, and it wouldn't really affect our cash flow (historically speaking), since we were used to a monthly car payment. Oh, I had to dip into the till a couple of times to cover a few large bills, but all in all, it was a good system. The money kept piling up, and I was on target to afford something nice.

In my graduate school days, I had done a bit of diamond and jewelry brokering, so I knew the ins and outs. I tried my hand at jewelry making as well. I made my own wedding ring-- a band of white gold sandwiched between yellow gold bands soldered into a single piece. I like to interpret the three rings as a symbolic union between Rose, God, and myself, with God as the white band of

purity and righteousness. The original design, however, was based solely upon artistic impression.

Once a fellow at the gas station admired my ring. When I said I'd made it myself, he asked, in his thick Middle Eastern accent, if that meant that I had married myself. I just laughed. I guess I wasn't thrilled about Rose's gift selection track record either. After all, a wedding ring is an item to be worn for a lifetime.

At the time of this writing, I'm not wearing my ring. Oh, I'll put it back on soon, but I've seemed to have developed an unusual sensitivity to poison ivy or poison oak. When I was younger, I could roll in it with no reaction. Once, Rose developed an awful rash, including a large spot on her back. I helped her apply some cream to those unreachable areas, and I've contracted rashes every growing season since. It is said that individuals take on characteristic traits of their spouses, but this is ridiculous. Well, we've definitely got some of the stuff somewhere in the yard out back. If I get that potent oil on my hands, the ring will never come off. I'm also taking the opportunity to resize my ring. I'm not the same diameter I was at the wedding alter in more ways than one.

Getting back to the bracelet -- investment of what I considered to be a sizable sum required some cross-checking. I had my fill of miscalculations. I brought home a number of jewelry catalogue photocopies for Rose to inspect. After all, it was not going to be a surprise gift. She made her choice; I got the ball rolling.

It gave me great pride to be able to give Rose a bangle bracelet with 1.5 carats in relatively high grade diamonds across the top. It was an eye-catching piece, although it really looked out of place with most of Rose's wardrobe. I presented the bracelet to Rose on August 31 and took it back the following week to get the engraving on the inside, "To My Dearest Rose on our 10th Anniversary." It made me proud to see Rose wear the bracelet. I think she wore it everywhere for the first week or so. Thereafter, I saw her wear it only to church on Sundays and special occasions. I

had noticed that the safety catch didn't work very well, but wasn't overly concerned.

November 26, 1995 was no ordinary day. It was Sunday, and we dressed for church as usual. We were running our obligatory 15 minutes behind schedule, but Rose, who seldom lets others drive her Suburban, made up ground on our 20+ mile trip to church. Like a seasoned jockey pulls back on the reins to keep a thoroughbred under control, I verbally throttled back Rose from my back seat location. As we approached the drop off point (Rose let us off and parked to minimize the tardiness of the kids to their respective classes), Courtney complained of a stomach ache. This was nothing new, really. I asked Courtney if she had used the bathroom that morning. When she said no, I told her that we'd stop off at the ladies room before I accompanied her to her classroom. We did, and she said she felt a little better.

Around 30-45 minutes later, I received a tap on the shoulder in my Sunday school class from our Children's Minister. Courtney was sick and was now in the children's divisional office resting. When I got there, Courtney was looking okay. She had a half empty Coke can in her hand and was going after the second half. It was a special Sunday School day with a mission emphasis. The kids paraded from room to room to hear different missionaries tell about their experiences. It was during one of the treks through the hallway between missionaries when Courtney had spotted the Children's Minister. They had always had a special relationship. Like a dam bursting, Courtney began crying at the sight of a familiar face. Courtney had a bad stomach ache. A few minutes after my arrival, Courtney's teacher came by to see if she'd like to come back to class. By then, Courtney was feeling better, and after a second trip to the bathroom, Courtney went back to Sunday School for the last 10 minutes.

I picked Courtney up from class, but she was moving kind of slow and acting sleepy. We wasted a few minutes in the church library while the crowd from the earlier service dissipated. Rose,

Courtney, and I went into the sanctuary early enough to get three aisle seats, front and center -- or at least as close as we cared to be. During the service, Courtney wanted to rest and perhaps even take a nap. Due to the circumstances, we obliged her. We'd made it through prayer, musical worship, and offertory fine.

The pastor was a good ten minutes into his sermon when suddenly Courtney rose up with wide eyes and declared she felt like she was going to throw up. I whisked Courtney around Rose who was seated at the end. We made it about 20 feet toward the rear when Courtney spilled her guts on the carpeted aisle, still a good 10 or more pew rows from the door. Like the Dutch boy who put his finger in the dike, I put out my hand, as if there were a chance that Courtney's stomach contents would stop at one handful (or mouthful). Some kind, quick-thinking person handed their husband a purse-sized pack of tissues, who in turn passed it to me. During that split second I contemplated actually trying to clean up the mess, but Courtney was obviously not finished, so we side-stepped the mess and rushed to the nearest ladies room. It was not soon enough though as Courtney had a repeat performance on the ladies room floor. Even as we hurried out of the sanctuary, I recall one woman's comforting words, "Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it. You'd be surprised at how often that happens." Well, that made me feel better, but I wasn't the sick one.

Rose was apparently ignorant of the vomiting incidents, as she kept her seat throughout the remainder of the sermon. Courtney was resting comfortably now on a padded pew in the hallway, just outside the bathroom. Just prior to the extension of the invitation, I left Courtney to retrieve her mother before we had to deal with a crowd in getting Courtney to the car. Rose offered to escort Courtney across the street and remote parking lot, while I retrieved Creighton, our son, from his Sunday School classroom. We met up at the truck -- ready to convalesce at home.

We reached our house without further incident. Creighton was fast asleep in the front seat. Rose scooped him up to take him to bed so

that his nap would go uninterrupted. I aided Courtney to her bed also to recuperate from within a state of slumber. It was somewhere about then, when Rose began to undress from her Sunday clothes that she declared her bracelet missing.

We searched Creighton's bed while he slept -- but no bracelet. Rose and I looked all around the Suburban, inside and out -- to no avail. I called the church, but of course, no one was to be in the office until time for the evening worship service. I used the voice mail system to leave a message for the Children's Minister, in hope that she could check in the church office for lost and found items. Strangely enough, Rose seemed more distraught than me. Although our efforts that day were unsuccessful, I was sure that if the bracelet were lost at church, someone would recognize its value and turn it in.

The next morning, I had an eye doctor appointment in the vicinity. My pupils were still dilated, but I stopped off at the church to retrace our steps from the time we parked on Sunday morning, to the time when we returned separately to the car to go home. My eyes combed the extensive parking area and church grounds. Once inside the building, my eyes scoured the premises. Surely if the bracelet were lost inside the building, someone would have picked it up by then. I checked the Sunday School room, but the entire room layout had been changed since Sunday morning. I looked and felt around the cushions in the pew where Rose sat, and sat, and sat, while Courtney's stomach was turning inside out. I went to the church office and inquired about returned items. I left my name, phone numbers, and a description of the bracelet on a sticky note pad in the main secretary's office. I checked in with the Children's Minister. The bracelet was nowhere to be found.

It was on my way back across the street and into the parking lot when a great sense of comfort came over me. It was there on the tree-lined walkway that I reflected upon the goodness of our Lord. If God wanted us to find that bracelet, we'd get it back. Why if God so desired, He could make diamond bracelets sprout on the

very trees which marked my path. I was no longer concerned. The earthly value of that bracelet was placed in proper perspective. My God is Lord over it all.

Over the next few days, Rose and I simply made the bracelet an object of our prayers. Rose was reminded of the account in the sixth chapter of the book of 2 Kings where Elisha was able to recover a borrowed ax head which was lost in a stream. God answered Elisha's prayer by making steel float to the surface of the water. I also thought of the parable of the woman who lost a coin. She swept the house clean until the item was found. I took this to heart and thoroughly searched the carport, manned with a leaf blower.

With the passage of time, my positive outlook had turned sour. Surely, the bracelet was found by then. Perhaps it had been pawned. Maybe the diamonds had been extracted, and the bracelet reduced to its gold value.

My prayers also had changed. If the Lord had put the bracelet into the hands of a needy person, then let it be so. However, if it had fallen into the hands of a greedy person, I was in favor of the Lord striking the individual with plagues as when the Ark of the Covenant had fallen into the hands of the Philistines. Wherever the Ark was kept in the land of Israel's enemy, the people of the town suffered. Many were covered with tumors. The Ark went from town to town until the Philistines' only desire was to rid themselves completely of this spoil of battle with the Israelites. The fear of God motivated the Philistines to even send gifts of gold back with the Ark. Rats and tumors cast in gold symbolized the way the Philistines suffered for failing to humble themselves before the God of Israel. There was much celebrating in Israel when the Ark was returned, but it was the Lord's hand that brought it back -- not the actions of the Israelites.

Before long, the bracelet was no longer a concern of ours. We had a big family vacation planned to Disney World, and we were

ready to go. I was ready to go. I'd never been before. This was, of course, before the boycott. Having kids with ages three and eight is a ready-made excuse for some kid fun as an adult. I couldn't get a good deal on airfares, so we opted to drive. That decision was based on some bad information on the length of the drive. We had allotted only one day for the outbound trip. As reality sank in from inspecting maps and mileage charts, I did allow for a two-day return.

We had a great time as a family. My step-daughter, Angie -- then in her early twenties, went also. This was one trip where after the initial planning, money was not a concern. That's the kind of vacation I like. So many times before our vacations could not be divorced from our financial situation. As we were driving back, our thoughts turned toward Christmas, which was only two days away. We'd get home in time to spend one night in our own beds before we'd reload and head south to my parents' home for the holiday.

When we arrived home, there were a number of messages on our telephone answering machine, including multiple ones from someone I didn't recognize. The message was to please return his call before Christmas. One of the recordings said that he'd also tried to reach me at work. I called my voice mail system at work to see if there were any additional clues to the mystery caller. The message at work shed no additional light on the identity of the caller. In fact, the message was essentially a repeat of the one on my personal answering machine. Again, there was an emphatic plea for a return call before Christmas, if at all possible. I dialed the number, not really knowing what to say except that I was returning the call. I really did not want to talk to a sales person, but not just anyone would have access to both my work and home phone numbers. The voice on the other end of the line was a friendly one -- an elderly man with a passionate but decidedly poignant tone. Quickly the conversation turned to a matter of a lost bracelet!

I answered a number of detailed questions concerning a description of the bracelet we lost and the general location where the loss occurred. When I related the inscription, the voice on the other end of the phone said he was confident that he had our lost bracelet in his possession. He then told me how he came upon the bracelet in the shopping center parking lot on one of his periodic walks. He was not a member of our church. The church is the landlord of the shopping center property, but there was no positive link between the found bracelet and the church across the street. In fact, when the church was contacted, no connection was made, despite the church office having the necessary information. On the second or third consultation with the church office, cross-referencing with lost-and-found notes surfaced my information, including my work and home numbers. He wanted to resolve the situation before Christmas as a sort of Christmas present to relieve any further anxiety before the holiday. The conversation then turned to how we'd rendez-vous before our family needed to leave town again. We decided to meet at his home following the church service the following morning.

The exchange meeting took place. We spent a good hour visiting before our kids' began displaying signs of impatience. Besides, it was two o'clock in the afternoon, and we hadn't fed them lunch. We drove off feeling good. It was nice to have the bracelet back, but it was, by this point, anecdotal. Our initial prayers were answered, but our lives were enriched so much more through this experience. Most every Sunday after the morning worship service, I glance skyward when passing along the tree-lined walkway and smile. The most profound thing is that I'd still do the same -- with or without the bracelet.

Reflections

Have you lost something which nearly drove you crazy? Car keys are probably the most common example. Perhaps you retraced your steps, moved the furniture, and sweated bullets until those keys turned up. I already alluded to a Biblical parable equivalent, the lost coin. Likewise, we have the story of the shepherd who left his flock of 99 to look for the one that strayed. The important thing to take away is the value God places on each of us. He wants nothing greater than to see us acknowledge him as Creator and Lord. Things are just things. God owns it all. God can replace it all and more. The question is, "Should he?" Matthew 16:26 reminds us of the words of Jesus, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the world, yet forfeits his soul?" Finding things doesn't compare with finding your way to God.

God came into this world to let us know Him better, to teach us how we should live, and to provide a means for us to come be with Him in heaven after this life is over. Those that reject God and His plan either refuse to believe in an afterlife or have modeled a god in their own image. If mortal life is the end of an individual, then the self-gratifying lifestyle is a means to an end, literally. At the other extreme are those that believe an all-loving god would send no one to hell. Adjacent to these are people who believe that no god would send anyone to hell who has led a "good" life. In turn, the eastern religions have no real need for salvation, since everything is god, and god is in everything. In those circles, if you don't come to that perfect realization, you get another chance at life in another form. The rebirth of this philosophy in America is found in the New Age Movement. What do you believe about God? A surprisingly large number of people don't even have an answer to that question.

When Jesus walked the face of this earth, most saw him as a man, many felt that he was a prophet, few recognized him as the Christ,

God incarnate. As difficult as it is to believe, a direct encounter with the Son of God could be spiritually uneventful. If this were not so, not a hand could have been lifted to beat, scourge, or crucify Jesus. Without the crucifixion, we'd still be judged by our ability to conform to Old Testament law, we would still be sacrificing animals to gain forgiveness for our sins, and we wouldn't be able to pray to our god as individuals apart from our priest. God, of course, could have had an alternative plan for our redemption, but instead God had a perfect plan which was fully aligned with God's relationship to man following Adam's choice to disobey.

In Hebrews 9:22, we are reminded, "In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." Jesus was that sacrifice for you and me. 2 Corinthians 6: 21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." The Bible does not teach universalism, that we're all going to heaven. You must recognize we are all unworthy to come before a righteous god, affirm the deity of Jesus, believe that Jesus died to cover your sin, and accept that he was resurrected to be with God the Father and to mediate on your behalf. Thus, we enter into heaven on the proverbial coattails of Jesus and not on our own, because there is no act of goodness good enough to pay for your own ticket. Can I count on seeing you in heaven?

12 The Thorn in My Side

Each of us has that a little something physical about themselves they really would like to change. Sometimes it's only something external, such as hair color. Americans spend millions each year adding highlights, touching up the gray, or completely changing their hair color. According to a November, 1996 article in American Demographics, 26% of U.S. households purchased hair color products for women in 1995. In contrast, 3% of U.S. households purchased color treatment products for men in the same year. Are men buying hair color products for women?

Some of the differential can be contributed to a double standard concerning gray between the sexes; however, many men have a more harrowing problem. You've got to have something there in order to treat it! Pharmacia & Upjohn, Inc. reported \$96 million in Rogaine sales in 1994 to the U.S. market. The product is now available as an over-the-counter product at full prescription strength. As of early 1997, Pharmacia & Upjohn claimed more than 5 million Rogaine customers. Bald may be beautiful, but a lot of people think the more, the merrier.

On a more permanent note, cosmetic surgery is a multi-billion dollar industry. Reconstructive surgery restores countless victims of accidents and cancer, but the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery logged more than a million elective surgery cases in 1994 -- the face lifts, the tummy tucks, the liposuctions, etc. At that time, the most popular procedures by far were liposuction, chemical peel, and hair transplants. The age group 35-50 accounted for only 34% of those procedures tracked. Breast augmentation topped the list for 19-34 year-olds, but this procedure had dropped from the charts for the over 35 crowd. Are mature women no longer preoccupied with breast size, or is vanity merely diverted elsewhere?

For those not inclined to go under the knife by choice, there is no shortage of cosmetic products claiming to erase or lessen facial wrinkles. According to the February, 1996 issue of Medical Sciences Bulletin, "Nearly 25 million women in the U.S. are between the ages of 30 and 50, and they spend more than \$1 billion annually on cosmetics to reduce the ravages of time." In the same report, Johnson & Johnson's Ortho Pharmaceuticals projected \$175 million in first year sales for their newest anti-wrinkle cream, Renova. Considering the price of some of these items, I have advised my wife to douse on a little Crisco[®] shortening. So far, she's ignored my suggestion. I suppose, if heeded, she might have smooth skin but a problem with flies.

In this age of science and technology, countless 'defects' can be masked or completely repaired, and Americans are willing to exchange a big chunk of their paychecks for a little self-esteem boost. Still, others are humbled by more deep-rooted problems for which medical science offers no quick-fix cure at any price.

The most prolific of all the Biblical writers, Paul, agonized over some such ailment. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10,

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

To the world, Paul's discourse is paradoxical. It runs counter to the world view, but isn't so the entire Christian life? We don't know for sure what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was, but we do know that for Paul, it was something he must have confronted

daily. Paul was tormented, not just annoyed or saddened, by his defect which God refused to mend or restore. Paul could heal others of their maladies through the power of the Holy Spirit, but he could do nothing about his own chronic condition.

Unlike many, however, Paul saw beyond his problem to recognize the hand of God in his impairment. Seeing beyond the situation -- isn't that the key to a victorious life no matter what the circumstances? Saul of Tarsus had met the risen Lord face-to-face, was given an evangelistic calling, was the instrument of God's blessing in a miraculous healing ministry, and was spared his own life on countless occasions. If anyone had reason to think himself special, it was Paul. Still, Paul's thorn in the flesh kept his feet on the ground. Paul retained a strong dose of humility because of the weakness so obvious and painful to him.

Do you have a thorn in the flesh -- something which keeps you humble and brings you closer to God in a spirit of weakness? I most certainly do, although my thorn in the flesh may go completely unnoticed by all but those with whom I live. I too have voiced Paul's prayer for restoration, but it hasn't come. I also admit that this chapter was not in my original outline. I thought it too personal to share. On vacation with my family, amidst the biological clock confusion which accompanies a major time change, I felt convicted to write of my own thorn in the flesh, even as the unrelenting pain commenced.

When I succumbed to the Popeye manifesto, I sought help from a medical specialist. The Popeye manifesto is when you reach that point where you cry out, "I've had allz I can stand, and me can't stand no more." Men have especially high thresholds for admitting physical weakness. I could stand it no more and was ready to face a bad medical report just to substantiate that my problem was real and not going away on its own. I experienced tremendous headaches, neckaches, chills, and fever on a very frequent basis. A pattern had developed where I knew whether I was going to be sick each day by 8:00 a.m. My doctor scheduled a battery of tests.

Life threatening causes were ruled out, but a physiological condition was noted. In his opinion, my condition was controllable through a combination of diet and lifestyle change.

The doctor was right, but it took me nearly two years to learn how to cope with my condition. After extended self-experimentation, I have declared victory, but the battle is still a daily one. The best treatment for my condition is a fixed daily schedule -- a fixed schedule and a gallon of water a day. I drink a megasize glass of water at breakfast before my 45 minute commute to work and another at lunch. Somedays that drive is a formidable challenge to bladder control. Some co-workers may think I'm eager to get to work as I enter the building with a long stride and a serious face, but if they could keep pace, they'd find that I make a beeline for the nearest men's room. After taking care of business, they'd find a different me on the way to my office door -- the serious face given way to a smile and the quickened pace exchanged for a casual gait.

Chronic health problems are no fun, and they demand change. My situation also led me to incorporate a quiet time permanently into my schedule. Rarely will I sleep in. I can't afford it. I rise early in the morning and get with God and my Bible before greeting other members of God's creation. I can relate to Paul's declaration, because when I am weak physically, I am strengthened emotionally and spiritually. I have a thorn in my side, and I can see and relate to God more clearly because of it. Perhaps someday I will be healed. Perhaps I will not. It is not a question of faith, because my God is a god of miracles. Regardless of the outcome, I count it all joy.

Reflections

What is keeping you from fellowship with God? Do you need a spiritual wake-up call? Why must we wait to return to God in times of crisis? Why does a physical crisis get our attention more easily than a spiritual crisis? People are scared to death of a six-letter word, CANCER, because it reminds us of our mortality and the possibility of a painful death. Why are people not scared of a four-letter word, HELL?

Fellow Christian experiencing physical problems, the Lord can heal you, but should he? Perhaps you, like me, can find strength through your weakness. Would your daily walk be stronger or more prone to postponement if you experienced total restoration of your physical impairment?

Non-Christian, the same God that parted the Red Sea performs miracles today. Why should God perform a miracle for you? Jesus had a healing ministry. In Matthew 11:20 we find, "Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent." Why should Jesus perform a miracle for you? Rather, repent, seal your eternal destiny, then bring your petition to God.

13 The Road To Damascus Or Santa Fe

Rose had abandoned her family for two weeks of active military duty in Oklahoma, but we were managing household affairs just fine. During that time period though, I was having some trouble sleeping. I always have difficulty sleeping when Rose is out of town. Usually I place her pillows lengthwise in her place. That helps a lot. This was different. My difficulties were not just waking up in the middle of the night as usual in Rose's absence. I was waking up to sharp pains in the chest. The pain would go away almost as fast as it came. By the time Rose returned, I was pretty much back to normal.

I received an invitation to attend a technical workshop in Los Alamos. It was an honor to be asked to come speak at such a gathering of experts from across the country. My boss wasn't supportive of the trip, so I took vacation time and went representing Me, Inc. I arrived in Albuquerque as I had done many times before. I picked up my rental car and was on my way. As it was almost dusk, I decided to go to Los Alamos via Santa Fe. There is a fantastically beautiful back road through the mountains, but I thought it wisest to return that way when I could see the sights rather than drive past them in a shroud of darkness. Besides, some of the best food in the world is served in Santa Fe, and it would be just about dinner time when I would hit St. Francis Boulevard.

About midway between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, it hit me like a ton of bricks. A piercing pain in the chest nearly overpowered me. I felt a little light headed and moved over to the outside lane in case I needed to stop. I decelerated but regained my faculties. There was no place to stop. I was in a barren place. Sure, there were other cars on the road, but who would stop to help? What help could they provide, anyway? The logical choice was to drive on. Twice more the pains returned. On the road to Santa Fe, I

thought my life was coming to an end. Could I be having a heart attack at age thirty seven?

There I was, having a heart problem out in the middle of nowhere and far from home. I thought about the inconvenience it would be for Rose to deal with arrangements in getting my body back to Texas. What a mess! It was far too much trouble. I couldn't die and cause such administrative problems. I thought about my kids. With my son not quite five, he'd not remember his dad when he grew older. Who would be there to make Courtney sit before her piano to practice? I couldn't die. There were too many loose ends.

Far from home and the family I loved, I asked God to allow me to finish this life strong. This book was not yet complete. My vision of a Passion Week musical piece was still just a vision. My Judeo-Roman epic would never hit the shelves or the Big Screen. All these mission opportunities would die with me. It just simply couldn't happen. I told God so.

Three times I felt faint with sharp chest pains and pulled over to the side of the road to pray. I ate what I thought might be my last meal in Santa Fe that evening. Some might think it strange that I drove to a restaurant rather than a hospital. I don't know why. Maybe it's a man thing. After a great southwestern style dinner, I drove on to Los Alamos again thinking of all the unfinished business I had with God. I knew there were things left for me to do this side of heaven.

Upon my arrival at the hotel in Los Alamos, I called home to talk to my wife. She felt confident that I was just experiencing heartburn. I drew some confidence in her medical opinion. She suggested that I get something to settle my stomach from the drugstore. I did. I really didn't derive any comfort from that bottle of chalky stuff. I slept little that night. My mind was racing. My chest continued hurting. I couldn't escape the thought, "If I fall asleep, will I wake up?"

Medically, it turned out to be acute heartburn. Spiritually, it turned out to be acute heart examination. Ever since that time, I've battled periodic heartburn episodes. Ever since that time, I've been determined to make my remaining time on this earth count.

Reflections

When's the last time you had a spiritual check-up? If you died today, what would be left undone? Studies tell us that the majority of us will be remembered for only about two weeks after our death. Life goes on. Oh, family members will still have recall, but will you leave any fruit from your lifetime for future generations? Leave behind a legacy before you go to your eternal reward. Whatever direction you're driving today, stop the car, examine your spiritual condition, steer in God's direction, and mash that accelerator!

14 Finding God's Will

Mid-life is a dangerous time. I guess most people go through some kind of mid-life crisis. Often they get through it unscathed. Some buy sports cars. Some seek new thrills, such as flying. Men would do well to guard their hearts. Many men are driven into the hands of another woman by their inability to find whatever is missing in their lives, discarding their relationships with wife and children for pleasures of the moment. The Bible says in the book of Proverbs, "The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit; he who is under the Lord's wrath will fall into it." It also states that God will not let the sin of adultery go uncovered; He will testify against that man and bring him to account. Proverbs 6:27-29 asks, "Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished." Mid-life is indeed a dangerous time.

Regardless of the temptation and whether or not it leads to sin, mid-life is a time for soul searching. Some souls find their way into the Lamb's Book of Life; others set a course for self-destruction with eternal consequences. Those who already call themselves Christians often question the career path and lifestyle they've chosen, as they want to make a difference in this life and beyond. The thought of being forgotten two weeks after your burial brings forth a sense of urgency to one's remaining years. It sounds like King Solomon, the wisest man to walk the earth, aside from Jesus, was doing a lot of soul-searching throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. I know no one who desires to live a meaningless life "chasing after the wind." Neither do I.

I'm the last to brag, but I found myself in a comfortable position. I had an intelligent, loving spouse, two great, well-adjusted kids, an okay home, reasonably dependable transportation, a fantastic church home, and more. We weren't rich; we were getting

comfortable. I also found myself giving significantly to others. We'd been foster parents. I had been involved in several children's ministries. In terms of charitable giving, we'd gone well past the tithe. Things were seemingly okay at my job too. I was earning a decent income. I had the respect of my peers. I'd published quite a few papers in popular technical journals. I'd traveled to places like Russia, Norway, England, France, and Canada on job-related occasions. I worked with some of the brightest people on leading edge imaging and supercomputing technologies in our national laboratories. A colleague of mine even dropped by my office occasionally to assure me that if successful in my research endeavors, I could win a Nobel prize. Although this comment was always made in a semi-serious manner, I took it all in stride, knowing that Nobel Prizes are not awarded in engineering. Still, it is a tremendous boost to feel that your work is appreciated, and not regarded as Solomon puts it, "...something meaningless under the sun."

Then I began becoming uncomfortable with being comfortable -- with a little help from circumstances. Was I really making a difference with the major fraction of my time, my career? Of course, several rounds of layoffs in the research department will get your attention. The message being heralded by the management across America was clearly that research has little value. Right behind research comes researchers. I also pondered, "Is it a valid use of my time to investigate why things work the way they do? Why not just ask God, since physics is his specialty? If he'll answer, it'd sure save a lot of time and effort." I also began to be challenged spiritually. Does my work honor God? Does it make an eternal difference? Am I in the center of God's perfect will for my life? Is there something else I could do that would have a greater impact on the eternal destiny of those I pass in the halls and in the malls? Should God's work be limited to evenings and weekends? Was I a part-time Christian due to dilution?

There certainly were other things I have enjoyed over the years that potentially could honor God in a greater way, if done on a

full-time basis. Among those were composing music and writing short stories, but I'd neither performed in public nor successfully impressed a publisher. The internal pull in these directions was undeniable, but I questioned my ability to overcome my severe introvertism and my ability to garner a steady income -- or any income at all. I prayed about it a lot. Finally, I told God that if He wanted me to pursue music or writing, He needed to send me a strong word of encouragement.

When the children's bus ministry moved activities to Saturday, I suddenly had no commitments on Sunday morning for the first time in a decade. My wife and I began to attend Zig Ziglar's Sunday School class, known as the Encouragers Class. Zig is a great speaker and motivator. He draws a crowd, so it was easy to retain anonymity. One Sunday, Zig challenged the class to read *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon. Zig also said that if anyone pledged to follow the book's creed to always ask what would Jesus do in each and every situation we encounter, he wanted to know about it. I made a note of the book title, but later that day, my wife produced a copy for me directly from our bookshelf at home. She remembered it was there, but she didn't recall being overly impressed by the book. As I began reading, I wasn't captivated by the plot or literary style, but the theme of the book was hard to discount.

One Sunday before class, I presented Zig with a letter stating that I'd read the book, and I was struggling with God's will for me with regard to my career. Two weeks later, I received a personal telephone call from Zig Ziglar. He was initially very apologetic. You see, he'd placed my letter in his jacket pocket and forgotten about it. Only when he went to put on the same suit again did he rediscover and read my letter. I never expected a phone call from him. He's a celebrity, a best-selling author with speaking engagements all over the globe, but Zig Ziglar gave me a call to follow up on my acceptance of the challenge he gave from the podium. Zig told me about the length of time it took for him to be able to do what he does best on a full time basis. The consummate

encourager was giving me a personal motivational word, spurring me on to find God's will and do it. I continued to attend Zig's class, and we exchanged a handful of letters. It just goes to show that you better be careful what you pray for, because you just might get it.

About that time, my wife had cut out an ad from a Christian magazine concerning a writers workshop. This magazine was offering an all expense paid workshop to foster the talents of potential freelance writers. I guess they were trying to guarantee a steady supply of literary contributors. To enter, one had to submit a sample of writing with a Christian message. As I had several chapters of this book written, I thought the timing was not by coincidence. The only catch was in the word limit. I had decided that the Diamond Tree story held my best potential as a stand alone narrative, but the word count feature of my word processor told me that my ready-made chapter was more than twice the acceptable length. I mercilessly chopped and whittled away. With each successive deletion, the job became more difficult. After some painful decision-making, I had my story. I recall my bold certainty that I was going to win one of those spots, and this just might be the launching pad for a new career. As the notification period approached, I nervously sifted through each day's mail. The winners notification never came. That was a real let down. I stayed away from writing for the next couple of months -- literary writing that is.

Just a few short months later, I found myself joining another church. My old church had outgrown the facilities and announced a plan to move the church significantly further north. As we were already logging a 25 mile trek each way, we found ourselves not getting caught up in the excitement that surrounds a move to the bigger and better. We probably would have stuck with our old church a little longer, but the death of a prior pastor prompted our early departure. This pastor was very much loved but was forced to leave the church due to marital infidelity. You see, that former pastor had dreamed of moving the church many years before. To

see the vision become a reality under the leadership of someone else was emotionally taxing, especially for Rose. The birth of the dream juxtaposed to the death at an early age from brain cancer of the man who first bore that dream proved too difficult for us. We never returned there for Sunday services after the funeral. God was tugging on our hearts and signaling to us that it was time to begin a new chapter, a new ministry, a new spiritual journey. Just as I had felt a sense of peace in first coming to Dallas, I knew the seed of Christian service and spiritual awakening had been planted. It was time to find God's will all over again.

Still, another revelation haunts me. Surely God would like to use me and whatever talents I have to His glory, but perhaps I'm not the one to carry the banner. Maybe my calling is a necessary but less dignified one. As I think about the great keepers of the faith in the Bible and in modern times, one thought surfaces. These great men and women did not get to where they were going alone. Most had parents, grandparents, friends, or relatives who instilled in them a foundation of Godly principles. As I look through Genesis, Chronicles, and even the Gospel of Matthew, I see a long procession of names before reaching those more notable descendants. I see that each and every name is important, and a break in the chain has unforeseen, yet far-reaching, ramifications. Had there not been an Arphaxad, we would not have a record of Abraham, whose faithfulness has brought God's blessing upon his descendants to this day. Had there never been an Amram, we'd never have heard of Moses, who faithfully served as an instrument of liberation for God's people from bondage in Egypt. If not for Zerubbabel, the very lineage of Jesus would have been broken.

My creed is a combination of the declaration of Mordecai to Esther, queen of ancient Iran, and of Job as he agonized over his plight. Mordecai told Esther, his cousin, that maybe she'd come to such a position in life for the purpose of saving her people. Mordecai insisted to let it be done through Esther and not another. Esther from her position of prominence exposed her heritage at the risk of her own life in obedience to her interpretation of God's

will for her life. On the other extreme, Job, stripped of wealth, family, friends, and health, declared, "Though He slay me, I will praise the Lord." Knowing not why things were the way they were, Job recognized that God's plan outweighs the desires of the individual mortal man. What is best is not always visible in a single instant in time or in a single person's life. Sometimes the collective good is only seen with the passage of time. Sometimes good is only recognized by the impact of events over several generations. Just take a look in the book of Hebrews in the well known "Hall of Faith" passages. There we are reminded of the faithful who never saw the promises of God fulfilled in their lifetime. Nevertheless, every promise was kept, and their faith was counted as righteousness.

I've come to the sobering realization that it's a noble calling to be a good husband or father. It is honorable to bring home a paycheck which allows my wife to take a lower wage nursing job taking care of underprivileged children in our public schools and the undesirable portions of our community. It is justification enough to raise children in the fear and admonition of the Lord who someday may play the piano for their church or preach from a pulpit. It's a justifiable ambition to teach about Jesus and God's plan of salvation in Sunday School. Which one of those kids will go on to be a missionary at home or abroad? Which life will fulfill the master plan? Which life will fulfill the Master's plan?

Even as I wrestle with the possibilities of being a less prominent piece of God's puzzle, I cannot draw that lot for myself. I can be content with my role, as long as I know it is God's role for me. As long as some uncertainty exists, I must keep testing the doors of opportunity that are available to me. I trust in God to keep redirecting me from the wrong path. I will continue to seek God's will concerning career alternatives. This book is a first start. By reading this book, you may in fact be fulfilling God's will for me. If a new ministry opportunity opens up for me, I'll praise the Lord. If I am never more than what I am today, I will praise the Lord. I

will have done my part in the seeking. I can go to the grave at peace with myself and my God.

Reflections

In order to act on the word of God, we need to read it and understand its relevancy for us today. God's will will not run counter to God's word, the Bible. We must be knowledgeable of what the Bible teaches and align ourselves with God's expectation of us. Anyone thinking they are doing a fantastic job in their workplace, but fails to meet the expectations of their boss, is spinning their wheels. Should we approach our relationship with the creator of the universe any less seriously?

Do you know enough about the Bible to teach, rebuke, correct, and train, as cited concerning scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16? In Ephesians 6:18, Paul refers to the word of God as the sword of the Spirit which enables us to take a stand against the devil's schemes. Fellow Christian, you don't have to initiate the conflict, because the battle will come to you. Can you adequately defend yourself and your faith?

When we know that we are loved unconditionally, that we are valued, and that there is a God-intended purpose for our life, we can enter each day with confidence. God, who transcends time, knows the details of your life before they are lived out. Life for each individual has purpose. What is your God-given role in life? Failure to find and complete that mission is our second biggest possible mistake. Worse is to miss out on eternal fellowship with God altogether. Are you prepared for the remainder of this life and the life to come? Are you ready to finish strong? Will you be able to hear those endearing words of the Master found in Matthew 25:21, "... Well done, good and faithful servant! ... Come and share your master's happiness!"

15 Autobiographic Dribble

At the time of this writing, I would be considered a young man by the world's standards -- just not my wife's. Some may say, "What is a young fellow like yourself doing writing autobiographic material? Aren't autobiographies written by people in their golden years to pass along wisdom to future generations? Aren't autobiographies self-serving? Aren't autobiographies full of half-truths and intended to fund a cushy retirement? Wouldn't decent folks wait until they die and let someone else tell their life story?"

When I resolved to write a book, I was prepared to write historical fiction with a strong Christian message. Someday I'll return to that path, but this book was written from a heavy heart. Is my story unique? Unique, yes, but not uncommon. I am convinced that countless others have untold miraculous stories that would eclipse my simple experiences.

So why did I bother to write an easily overshadowed work? In part, I write because thousands of Christian laymen with greater stories to tell are silent. Silence is drowned out by the smallest noise. So is the silence of Christians overcome by but a single voice in a sea of unbelieving, unchurched humanity.

The disciple, John, wrote in 1 John 1:1-4,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched -- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is

with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

John wrote from his personal experience, having seen, heard, touched, and been transformed by Jesus, himself. John wrote out of his desire to expand the circle of fellowship and to make his joy complete. I write because I am compelled to acknowledge God's grace experienced firsthand to all who will listen. I write not to elevate myself, but solely to magnify the one and only true God who knows the number of gray hairs on my head, who has woven a divine path for my life, and who guards my future. What will make my joy complete? My joy will be complete when my simple story is overwhelmed by a flood of compelling testimonials of God's grace too great for the world to ignore. There will always be God's messengers in the pulpits across America, but it is when the laypeople of God's church proclaim God's goodness, the world will indeed stand up and take notice.

If the Lord grants me a daily extension of this life, there will be more chapters yet to write. Meanwhile, I rejoice in the fact that I have a testimony.

Reflections

Writing this book has been a blessing to me. If it has helped you in any way, I'd like to know. Email me at:

rdhazlett@sbcglobal.net

I want to hear your story!

-Randy

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