

OVER THE EDGE



# OVER THE EDGE

*personal stories  
of adventure and faith*

TIMOTHY MARK



We want to hear from you. Please send your comments about this book to [timothy@timothymark.com](mailto:timothy@timothymark.com).  
Thank you.

*Over the Edge: Personal Stories of Adventure and Faith*  
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Edited by Jim Gallery & Jennifer Harshbarger

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Requests for information should be addressed to:  
Timothy Mark Ministries, PO Box 2003, Columbia, TN 38402  
or email at [timothy@timothymark.com](mailto:timothy@timothymark.com).

Additional resources available at [www.timothymark.com](http://www.timothymark.com)

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*To my Parents,  
Paul and Kay Pickell*

*It is impossible to count the number of gray hairs I have given you as I have gallivanted around the globe. Somewhere behind the scenes, as I set off on yet another adventure, you were always praying for me.*

*I will be eternally grateful.*



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## PREFACE

**W**hen I was a child, growing up in a small farming community in southern Michigan, I could only dream of adventures around the world. I remember thumbing through the pages of our encyclopedia and looking at pictures of far away lands, little knowing that one day I would have the privilege of traveling around the globe.

As an adult, I still search out adventure. Now the internet opens up opportunities I didn't even know existed. And so the list of adventures I am trying to fulfill continues to grow. So far I've only made it to five continents, with Australia and Antarctica still waiting to be explored. I'm actively pursuing options for both continents. You can be watching for a revised edition down the road, with stories from all seven continents.

At a core level, living my life over the edge is just part of who I am. It is also part of who I am spiritually.

Somewhere in all my wanderings I found we are all pretty much the same. We work. We provide shelter for our families. We try to get ahead. And sometimes, after all of that, there is still a sense of emptiness. We were created for more. We were created for God.

It is God who created me with this love for adventure, and it is God who makes the adventure fulfilling. Ultimately, the greatest adventure of all is being in a real, personal relationship with Him. That is what this book is all about. Yes, I hope you will be richly entertained by the stories. But I also hope you will be challenged to take your own relationship with God to the next level. I pray you will take a step of faith to the life God intended for you. It's a life of calculated risk and adventure with a little adrenaline thrown in for good measure.

I want to invite you on this adventure with me, one step over the edge.

## CHAPTER ONE

# ROUGH WATER RIDES

Our Zodiac plunged head first into the rising swell, salt water spray drenching the white knuckled passengers as it surged through the Pacific Ocean toward the home port. The relatively calm surface of early morning was now heaving with waves so high it was difficult to see the Napali coast of Kawai in the Hawaiian Island chain.

It had been quite a day, fulfilling boyhood dreams. We had eased the small craft into hidden water caves and under light waterfalls, working our way down the coast like treasure hunters searching for hidden loot. And we had found plenty of it. The coast line was the stuff of movie sets with images seen in the films “Jurassic Park” and “South Pacific”. Water from early morning rains at the top of the mountains now cascaded down hidden

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ravines in lush waterfalls, emptying into the ocean below. The sides of the mountains, deeply etched by years of erosion, were so rugged they were only accessible by boat or on foot. Tropical foliage blanketed the jagged peaks in multi-hued greens. It was paradise defined.

I had barely finished toweling off from skin diving the crystal clear waters when the time came to turn the boat back toward home. It was at this point the day became really interesting.

I had managed a place in the front of the boat just to the left of the captain. There are no seats as such on a Zodiac. Passengers sit on the rubber inflated tubes that make up the sides of the boat and lean in so as not to get tossed overboard. The bottom of the boat is hard and helps to stabilize the boat as she plies her way through the water. Ropes are passed through loops along the edge of the tubes to give the passengers something to hold on to when the action gets a little rough.

And the seas became more than a little rough.

All day long we had traveled down the coast in the same direction as the surf. What little wave action we had was pushing us in the same direction we were headed. It was late afternoon when we turned the craft toward home, and we found ourselves bracing rising swells.

The roller coaster ride lasted a full hour as wave after wave plowed into the vessel. At first I was concerned, but then I realized this was nothing new to the captain of the boat. He seemed to take great delight in all the action. Our fearless leader would open the engine full throttle as the craft went airborne from one wave to another, the propeller in a high pitched whine as the blades came out of the water again and again.

## ROUGH WATER RIDES

I began to get bolder, and soon I found myself standing in a surfer position at the front of the boat. My knees were bent for stability, and one hand held a rope on the center console. With great delight I would yell into the wind as the boat came out of the water. My knees buckled and my body lurched forward as the vessel slammed into the next wave. There was barely enough time to regain composure and brace myself for the next airborne adventure.

By the time we arrived safely in the harbor I was exhausted but grinning from ear to ear.

Sometimes the greatest adventure comes when you choose to go against the flow. Nothing is quite as boring as doing what everyone else is doing just because everyone else is doing it. There is a whole life of adventure just waiting for those who choose to take a different path. That path is the amazing life God intends for each of us to live.

So why is it so difficult to choose God's path? By nature we choose the path we think will have the least number of obstacles. We choose the harmless and familiar over the risky and questionable. We think if we play it safe we are at least living. And to a degree we are. But the Bible says Jesus came so we might have life and have it more abundantly. However, the abundant life God wants you to have is only available to those who choose to follow Him anywhere, including paths that are sometimes dangerous. But oh what a life!

Sometimes the ride may get rough and you think you are going to drown. You've held on for so long. All the blood has drained out of your fingers, and you are slowly, steadily losing your grip. The rope is cutting into your

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hand. You feel weak in the knees and wonder if one more wave is going to do you in. At that moment you glance over at the Captain and He smiles back at you, smiles in the midst of all the madness. It is then you realize He has it all figured out. He is not concerned. He knows exactly how much you can take, and He's not going to give you one bit more.

God takes great delight when we are willing to go against the tide, to live life His way instead of the way everyone else says you should. It may get rough at times, but the rewards for going with God, and often against the flow, are enormous. He has it all figured out. We just need to trust Him.

It is in that moment of trust it all comes together- the waves, the Captain, the boat, and the joy. And it is in that moment that we find the abundant life of adventure God intended for us all along.

Enjoy the ride.



## CHAPTER TWO

# TESTING THE WINDS

**I**n the distance I heard a deep, low rumble and turned my attention to the broad sky above the isolated stretch of beach near my home. The clouds were thick and black over the mainland and occasionally I could see streaks of lightning crease the sodden sky. Yet above the island sand where I stood it was clear and sunny. I licked a finger and held it out to find the exact direction of the wind. The air was still with no wind to indicate a storm was pushing in. I paused to weigh my options. Should I continue down the beach or return to the Jeep? I was a little more than half a mile from the Jeep but two and a half miles away from my intended turn around at the southern most point of the island. If I turned back now I could be sure of not having to dodge rain drops and lightning strikes.

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As a resident of Florida I knew all the rules. I knew if you can hear the thunder you should seek shelter. I knew if you can see lightning you should be somewhere with four walls around you and a roof over your head. Every year more people get struck by lightning than win the lotto. I don't play the lotto, but I do occasionally gamble with my life. I surveyed the scene, calculated my odds, and set out resolutely for the far end of the beach.

Periodically the wind would pick up, and I would question my intent and wisdom. But then the sky would turn from black to gray, and I would trudge on.

Thirty-five minutes and several false alarms later I found myself three tenths of a mile from the tip of the island. This time my luck ran out. I looked across the bay and saw a wall of descending rain approaching straight at me. I turned and looked back down the beach toward my parked vehicle over two miles away. There was no way I would make it back even if I ran with all my strength. Moreover, the nearest shelter was at least three hundred yards away. It was a lone Australian Pine tree, an ideal target for lightning looking for ground. But I made a pretty good target myself. I was standing alone on a bare stretch of sand with hardly a clump of sea oats for company.

The first wave of rain slapped my bare chest and sent goose bumps skittering up my arms. The cold water began to stream down my torso into my cargo shorts. I clenched my arms to my sides, drove my fist into my pockets, and prepared for the worst.

Like an advancing army the storm marched across the beach until I was completely overtaken. I was thankful this particular storm cell didn't appear to be laden with

lightning. I debated running back or standing still and finally decided God could hit a moving target just as easily as He could hit a stationary one so I might as well stay put and enjoy the show.

I began to walk, not toward my Jeep but to the remaining yards to the turn around point. I'm just stubborn enough to finish the race regardless of the circumstances. I tucked my chin to my chest to keep the rain from pelting me in the eyes and trudged on.

And that's when it occurred to me: this moment was a lot like life. When we find ourselves, for whatever reason, caught in a storm, sometimes the best thing to do is to just pause and bow your head. Bow your head and pray to the One who holds the storm in the palm of His hand.

Often in our lives the problems we get into are the result of poor choices we have made along the way. We survey the landscape, hear all the reports of how dangerous it is, and then plow ahead into the midst of a storm as if somehow we are immune to the dangers every one else faces in their lives. We become victims of our own stupidity.

When it does happen, and it will, I've found the best course is to stop everything and bow my head. I surrender to the Savior. I know it is usually my own fault, but that's what's so amazing about His grace. It is extended to us even when we don't deserve it. I bow before Him and acknowledge I don't have what it takes to make it on my own.

This acknowledgment allows me to find a peace in the midst of the storm, a quiet calm in the center of the chaos. The winds may rage on. The rains may drench me. But in that moment of surrender, I find strength to

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continue on toward the goal of the high calling of Jesus Christ.

I do not recommend foolishly ignoring the signs as I did and placing yourself in the midst of a whirlwind for no good reason. It would be better to learn to read the sky and to make wiser choices early on. But if you find yourself in the midst of one of those rollicking, face slapping storms, do what I've learned to do.

Bow your head.

## CHAPTER THREE

# RUN FOR THE BORDER

**M**y pulse quickened as I approached the four military guards in their olive green uniforms. In silence they were closely watching the monitors behind the screening area. One by one business men, families returning from Hong Kong, and I all placed our bags on the conveyor to be x-rayed. If all went well I would soon be crossing the border into mainland China. I forced a nervous smile and did my best to blend in with the others working their way through the line. At the other end of the room, which seemed light years away, was the door to the border. If I could just make it through that door without my bags being inspected I would be able to rendezvous with others on my team and together take an illegal shipment of Bibles far into the country. But for now it was just me, an x-ray machine, and four guards.

I placed my suitcase on the belt as the woman in front of me struggled to get her bag off the other end. Surely

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her misstep would be a distraction for the guards, and I would be on my way before she had even gathered her belongings together.

My pulse increased and I felt the blood rhythmically pounding in my neck. Look natural. Look calm. Look like you are not aware of the stash of Bibles, sandwiched between layers of old clothes, you are trying to smuggle into the country. “And the Emmy goes to...”

Apparently the guard didn’t buy my act. Almost to the door, so close I could see the rest of the team waiting in the plastic chairs in the room beyond, I heard the guard call out to me.

“Hello, Hello” he said with a thin Chinese accent.

I stopped and turned. Our eyes met. We smiled at one another. I pretended not to be concerned. He pretended not to care. And then he motioned me back to the long table where the other guards stood motionless waiting for my return.

“Yes?” I said, continuing my pursuit of the Emmy. He began sternly speaking to me in Chinese, reinforcing the fear and confusion that were now taking turns completely paralyzing me.

With a sigh I set the suitcase on the table and began to unzip it. At this point the guard surprised me, motioning instead to my shoulder camera bag, and asking me what was inside. Just how do you describe to the man a brick of gospel tracts jammed into a camera bag? I quickly decided playing dumb might be best and stared back at him with the “I have no idea how these tracts got in my bag” look. Perhaps I should let him read one for himself. Wasn’t that the point of bringing the tracts into the country? I could imagine myself so bold as to actually

explain the tract to the official. But in this one moment I just wanted to be done with the whole ordeal.

The guard held up one of the tracts to the light, tightened his lips, and rubbed his hand down the side of his face. With resignation I opened the suitcase to reveal the layers of Chinese Bibles. The guard took the suitcase, the camera bag, my passport, and motioned for me to follow him into a small room.

A bare light bulb hung from the ceiling. Behind a small metal desk another guard sat on a wooden chair, shifting his wiry frame back and forth as I entered the room. I envisioned the possibility of being beaten and wondered if it would leave scars. This was the moment my mother feared: the call in the middle of the night and a voice on the other end of the line identifying himself as the American Consulate. In a word, crisis.

Interestingly, the Chinese word for crisis is made up of two words: one for danger and one for opportunity. Every crisis has an element of each. It is what we choose to focus on that determines the definition of the moment.

At times, each of us will find ourselves defined by a crisis; that moment when our fears connect with reality and we find ourselves struggling to find the opportunity in the midst of the danger. What do we do when the crisis comes? How do we manage to find the strength to face that kind of deep, overwhelming challenge that threatens to capsize even the sturdiest of vessels? In a word, trust. Not trusting in your own strength or abilities, but instead, in an unswerving reliance in the one who promises to be with us even in the midst of crisis. He is always true to His word, and in His word He said “Do

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not fear for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10) Later, in the same passage, He says “For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.” (Isaiah 41:13) The challenge is to understand He is holding on to you, not the other way around. If it were a matter of me finding the strength to hold on to God I would surely fail. But He is the one holding on to me. And as long as I remember it is His kind hand that is holding me through the difficult times I can rest in His embrace.

It is with a sense of regret and relief that I tell you none of my fears in that small room on the border of China ever came to be. No beating. No scars. I regret it because I do dearly love a great story, but what followed was hardly a James Bond moment. The Bibles were weighed. The man behind the desk filled out the paperwork. I was escorted out, receipt in hand, and successfully made the trip to the door, without my luggage.

Later, I would return through the same border crossing, present my receipt, pay the fine and, amazingly, pick up all the Bibles which were confiscated. I took the books back to Hong Kong, repacked them, and smuggled them back through the border the following day.

My pulse quickened as I approached the guard station.

It was an opportunity I could not resist.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# DOUBTS IN THE DARK

**T**he wind through the open window in the Land Rover blew hot on my face and did little to bring any relief from the 110 degree temperatures outside. Inside the vehicle, Audrey DeJager, a missionary working with the Dialonke Tribe in the village of Medina, and I did our best to get comfortable and endure the bumpy ride to Dakar. We had begun our long ride hours before the sun had risen over the sub-Sahara plains that make up the Eastern most part of Senegal, West Africa. It was now late afternoon and the blistering sun was beating down mercilessly. I sat in a pool of my own sweat and drove the 4-wheel drive westward toward the coast and hopefully, cooler temperatures.

The road was bumpy and pitted with pot holes the size of wagon wheels. In some places there seemed to be more holes than road, so we drove the Land Rover onto

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the reddish-brown sands along the sides of the road. In the open fields, farmers hand raked the remnants of last season's peanut crop into loose piles and began the process of burning off the land, preparing the fields to plant a crop of hope for the coming year. The acrid smoke from the fires drifted across the road and mingled with the dust and sweat making breathing even more difficult. It had not rained in seven months, and any remnant of rain had long since evaporated into the feverish African sky. Cattle plodded along. Goats meandered across the road. In between labored breaths my thoughts drifted to the comforts of my home I had given up for this African adventure.

I remembered specifically a verse I had read shortly before I left. "Be not afraid for I am with you, be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with the right hand of my righteousness." (Isaiah 41:10) I wasn't afraid or dismayed. I was merely hot and tired. But it felt good to know I had Someone I could depend on to strengthen and encourage me along the way.

My thoughts returned to African soil, and I thought about the night in Chobo at the Abram's guest house. The guest room was a simply furnished, comfortable round house with a typical conical thatched roof. I lay in the darkness, my eyes wide open, clutching a small plastic flashlight. My sweaty fingers rested on the button which would illuminate the room. I listened as a violent wind storm began to approach. How I longed for rain to settle the dust. But at that moment I would have preferred to be in the company of friends instead of alone. The darkness lay thick like mud. Lightning flashed in the

distance, illuminating for a moment a small lizard clinging to the stucco wall inside. Outside something scraped against the roof. The wind whipped through the open windows, swirling the dust, and stirring my already peaked imagination. The Abrams lay sleeping in their home about 25 yards up the hill but it seemed more like 25 miles to me. I felt utterly exposed on the stormy African plain. “Be not afraid, for I am with you.” The thought rattled around my mind like a pebble in a jar. And somehow, in the midst of the storm, I drifted off to sleep.

A pothole of legendary proportions jarred me back to the present reality and set my mind to the road before us.

Many of us face uncertain circumstances in our lives every day. We plod along like so many Land Rovers on this bumpy road we call life. The road turns this way and that, is smooth at times and rough at others. Violent storms blow in and out of our lives, leaving in their wake broken hearts and wounded spirits. We face difficult days in silence while the rest of the world moves along at a breakneck pace, and we wonder why no one seems to care.

But Someone does care. His name is Jesus. And He brings to our humble circumstances the overwhelming gift of His presence in the midst of the storm. Amazing, isn't it? He knows intimately the struggles we face. Yet in His calm, reassuring voice says, “Be not afraid, for I am with you.” It is the gift of His presence filling in the holes and straightening the path along the way.

Remarkably, His presence is really all we need. I can stumble along and try to meet my needs apart from my relationship with God. I can busy myself in my attempt

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to make life work on my own. But at the end of the day, it always comes back to Him. Apart from Him my life is unmanageable. With Him I have all I need.

I don't know where you are at in your life today. But Jesus knows, and cares, and has promised to never leave you in your journey through life. His promises, written down for us in the word of God, are more than just ink and paper, more than just good ideas, and more than mere suggestions. His words are true. He longs to give you the amazing gift of His presence in your life today.

Call on Him today. And remember, be not afraid.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# THE RISK AND THE REWARD

**T**he air was crisp and cold as I pointed the skis downward and began to descend the coarse glacier snow high in the Austrian Alps. The blades of the skis cut into the frozen white crystals as I made the first turn, my body weight leaning onto the outside ski. Skiing in the Alps was a dream of a lifetime, and for this novice skier a dream that would quickly become a nightmare.

I had only skied one other time and that was on the relatively small hills in northern Michigan. At that time I had dutifully taken the skiing lessons from an instructor and had spent plenty of time on the bunny slope. I knew how important it was to make the turns and how to stop myself if I got out of control. By the end of that three day trip I was beginning to feel more comfortable with more difficult slopes.

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I was now on the second ski trip of my life and quickly learning that the most difficult hill in Michigan was comparable to the easiest slope in the Alps. I was clearly out of my league. But my one-step-over-the-edge attitude kept driving me to fulfill my fantasy of skiing in the Alps.

I was wearing a hideous bright pink ski suit which was given to me when I rented the skis. Apparently the idea was the fluorescent pink was easier to find when the novice skiers flew off the cliffs into the great white. I looked like the energizer bunny on skis. But I was undeterred.

When I left the rental store I looked around for the bunny slope. There would be no bunny slope. For that matter there would be no intermediate slope. It seemed every hill on the map began with at least one black diamond, the mark given for the advanced-skier-only slopes. And the black diamond looked more like a black skull and cross bones to me.

I took the ski lift to the top of the mountain, going for the all or nothing route, leaving all caution behind. I could ski, I told myself, and it was just a matter of following the basics. Snow was snow, right?

Wrong!

I made the first turn pretty well and was beginning to gain confidence when I began to gain speed. The hill was much steeper than I expected, and the moguls looked like Volkswagen Beetles covered with snow.

I gritted my teeth and bent my legs, working to maintain control as I headed into the second turn. But with my new found speed the turn wasn't as tight as it

should have been, and my angle heading down the hill was much too sharp.

I descended out of control. It wasn't a matter of feeling out of control. I was utterly, completely, out of control.

The snow in the air began to sting my cheeks, red from the chill in the air and the reflection of my pink snow suit flapping as I careened down the hill. I hit a mogul much too fast and fought to maintain some semblance of control. I was now rushing straight down the mountain, gripping the ski poles with a white knuckle death grip.

Whether it was the wisdom of more experienced skiers, or my blood curdling scream piercing the winter sky, I'll never know. But amazingly, the path cleared before me. For a brief moment I thought I was going to make it. Then, without warning, a large mogul, combined with my breakneck speed, sent me heavenward. Suddenly, I was sprawling through the air. My arms were flailing, my feet running in motion with nothing but skis attached below, and my mouth was opened wider than my eyes.

Ski poles and skis flew in opposite directions while my body flipped through the air and plowed into a snow bank. I hit hard. As I lay there with pain slowly spreading throughout my body, I decided I would spend the rest of the afternoon warm and resting in the comfort of the log cabin lodge. The German Polka band and the yodeling lady would be my entertainment.

Do I have any regrets? Zero. Would I do it again? Absolutely.

Sometimes, in order to experience all God has for us, we have to take a few risks. We need to get out of our

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comforts zones, and yes, even fail a time or two. It is in the risk that we reap the rewards.

Sometimes, God actually leads us to fail. Failure is one of the tools God uses to make us more like Him. We learn lessons in failing that we could never learn any other way. Lessons like how much we need God, how unable we are on our own to provide even basic needs for ourselves.

God never intended for us to live safe lives. Did Christ live a safe life when He left the throne of heaven to live as a man on a dirty, soiled planet? Christ took the risk, and He died for the sins of man. Yet he was rejected time and time again by those He loved the most. He took the risk because He understood the rewards. He made a way so you and I could have a personal relationship with Him, a reward you and I get to share with Him forever.

I will never forget the thrill I felt descending that mountain. Awkward? Perhaps. Out of control? Absolutely. But I was, in fact, skiing the Alps, and no one could take that away from me. I was living a dream and laughing all the way.

What is it in your life right now that seems overwhelming to you? Failure looms just around the next turn, and you can feel the momentum carrying you out of control. Your dream is turning into a nightmare, and you are about ready to quit. The obstacles along the way are bigger than you can manage, and a crash is almost certain.

Who cares! You are on the ride, and that is what counts. Don't quit. Hold on to those ski poles a little tighter. Bend the knees a little deeper. Experience the thrill of getting outside your comfort zone one more time. If you wipe out, you will get back up. You will enjoy



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the fulfilling reward of being in the game. And, you just might appreciate the yodeling lady as you sit and contemplate the next slope you are going to ride.

Get back out there and do it again. One day you will ski with confidence, perhaps a little bit out of control, but enjoying every moment of the risk and the reward.



## CHAPTER SIX

# GOOD EVENING, MR. AMBASSADOR

I looked around the room, feeling out of place and nervously excited at the same time. Across the yard, the Ambassador and his wife casually strolled among small groups, greeting individuals by name. Soft music filled the cool evening air mingling with smoke from the grill filled with chicken, beef and sausages cooking on the open fire. It was a once in a life-time opportunity to have dinner with the United States Ambassador to Panama and his wife at their residence in Panama City.

It all began innocently enough. I was doing a concert tour of American military bases in Central America and staying with a host family in Panama City. When my Panamanian neighbor learned I was single, she arranged a meeting with her unsuspecting daughter. Now you need to understand I dread this kind of “oh-I-just-stopped-by-to-chat-about-the-weather-and-meet-the-mother-of-my-

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children” meetings. They are uncomfortable, unnerving, and to be avoided like Ebola.

But the neighbor was persistent and the next evening I found myself meeting “the daughter”.

I was pleasantly surprised. Carolina turned out to be rather charming. It was a relief she was fluent in English, since I knew only eleven words in Spanish.

Carolina mentioned she was on her way out the door for a dinner party at the Ambassador’s residence. She worked at the American Embassy and the Ambassador was hosting a casual dinner for some of the employees. Would I like to come along?

Would I like to come along? Would I like to win the lottery (if I played)? Would I like to retire at 30? What kind of question is “would I like to have dinner at the Ambassador’s residence?”

It’s the kind of question you always answer “Yes!”

We drove her SUV through the crowded streets to a large estate nestled on the top of a hill, overlooking the sprawling city below. The large steel gate was opened just wide enough to allow the visitors in. A guard shack was located inside the perimeter of the grounds. Soon we were walking up the drive to the beautiful home of Ambassador and Mrs. William J. Hughes.

The party was a simple, casual affair. But to me, it was a night to remember. I remember the awkward moment when the Ambassador’s wife greeted me with a kiss on the cheek and I realized I had forgotten to shave. We’re talking major lip/razor burn. I remember the elegance of the estate and the way the baby grand piano adorned the formal sitting room. From the sitting room window I could see much of the city sparkling below like a sea of

flickering lights. I remember chatting with the Ambassador and his wife Nancy after all of the guests had gone. I wandered through the cavernous house, taking pictures and trying to take it all in.

I remember how privileged I felt to be there.

Later that night as I lay in bed, I thanked the Lord for such a wonderful memory. As I paused in my prayer to take a breath, it was as if I could hear Him whispering to me, “Tim, you’ll never know how much I loved watching the look on your face as you walked through the gate of the estate. I have things prepared for you that you can not even imagine. All I ask is that you love me.”

There were no great trumpet fanfares declaring the word of the Lord. The Lord revealed no grand vision for ministry for the next hundred years. Tablets of stone did not appear and declare the top ten things it takes to be a good Christian.

Just a request - “love me”.

That was all He was asking me to do.

It was simple, yet so profound; just love the Lord. How easy it is to get caught in the performance trap, focusing on what we do instead of who we are. And the most important aspect of who we are as Christians is our relationship with God.

Do I really love the Lord the way I say I do? I’ve asked myself that question many times, and have come up with as many different answers. No matter how hard I try, sometimes I blow it when it comes to genuinely loving God with all my heart. So many times I find myself distracted by things which don’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

## OVER THE EDGE

Most times I have to acknowledge I love myself much more than I love God. It is easy to say, “I love you Lord” and then go about the day as if He didn’t even exist. He always pursues me. I seldom pursue Him. He always thinks of me. I seldom think of Him. I can’t imagine how many times I have let Him down by my self-centered thoughts and actions. And self-centeredness will strangle any relationship.

Then there are those humbling moments when I feel Him pulling at my heart strings, pulling me back to Him, back to the place where I know I am loved. It is the place where I find forgiveness and grace for every need.

Those moments make me wonder just what God has prepared for me. Well, I can keep wondering because His word says no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has even imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him.

So I’ll keep wondering and waiting and packing my bags for the next great adventure along the way. I’m going to keep trying to love Him with all my heart and soul and mind. I’m going to keep coming back to Him, because His love is irresistible to me.

And, as I stumble along in this journey called life, I may even brush up on my etiquette and, perhaps, even remember to shave.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# HANG UPS THAT HELP

The early morning air was crisp and cool as our boat pulled away from its mooring on the Homer Spit. Slowly we headed into the bay for a rendezvous with the local wildlife. I had decided to take a day cruise on the Sizzler, joining a dozen or so other eco-tourists for a first hand experience in the cold waters off Homer, Alaska.

When he spotted my binoculars and bird book, Captain Lee sent his first mate Evan to invite me to spend the day with them at the helm. It was an offer I gladly accepted.

The captain was a wealth of information, and I was thrilled to learn from his wisdom. He pointed out unusual wildlife and identified many waterfowl I would have otherwise missed. It was like having my own private tour of the bay.

## OVER THE EDGE

Our first stop was Gull Island, a rookery sanctuary for about seven different species of harbor birds. Captain Lee pulled the boat in close to the bare, rocky island so I could get some close up pictures. I stood at the front of the boat steadying my camera with a tripod as the boat bobbed up and down in the light swells. After I snapped the picture I would turn and signal the Captain. He would ease the boat back out into open water, less vulnerable to the jagged, gray black rocks near the shoreline.

This was a National Geographic moment for me. Common muirs were the most prominent birds, their penguin-like bodies covering a hillside. Rather than building a nest, they chose to lay a single, turquoise, oblique egg directly on the rocky surface itself. Some of the chicks had already hatched, their tiny black eyes peering out from their downy little bodies.

Another bird that caught my attention was the tufted puffin, which burrows instead of building a nest. This burrow may be up to eight feet long. Once the parents feel the chicks are old enough to fend for themselves, they desert the babies. After a few weeks have passed, the chicks get hungry enough to venture outside in search of food.

Gull Island also hosts several families of red breasted cormorants. I was delighted to see a few, because this is the only area in the world where they exist.

But of all the creatures I saw that day, one of the most interesting was the sea otter. They are the clowns of the sea, appearing to play non-stop. But the sea is a dangerous place and the otter must take special precautions to survive.



Orca whales look at sea otters the way I look at a nice, juicy steak. So for the sea otter, the greatest challenge is to keep from falling asleep in the water and drifting out into orca whale territory. To avoid the orca, the sea otter will find a kelp field, literally a sea weed forest, and roll itself up in the kelp to keep anchored down. The otter will not float away into dangerous territory and the orca will not go into the kelp fields since it interferes with the sonar by which it feeds.

What interests me is that the sea otter understands what will keep him safe. The kelp looks like any other sea weed to me. But for the otter, it is life itself. It saves him from an almost certain death. If he stays in the kelp, he lives. If he drifts away, he dies. It's as simple as that.

I wonder if God's word isn't a little like the kelp field. As long as I stay in the word, I can be sure of safety. It is a refuge, a safe retreat from the dangers of life. It is a sanctuary so simple and obvious, so readily available to me.

If I spend time in the Word I am less likely to drift into Satan's territory where I will most surely be devoured. He would like nothing more than to destroy me. He circles and circles, just waiting for the right moment to rush in and crush me with a powerful blow. He is an enemy to be reckoned with. He lives for one purpose only, to destroy me and the work God intends to do through me.

The Word is like the kelp fields. It protects us from Satan's attack. Yet it is a great mystery to me, how ignorant of God's word many Christians are. Most spend very little time in the Word. Then they wonder why they get nailed by the enemy. Why are families falling apart?

## OVER THE EDGE

Why do people succumb to temptation? Why do so many Christians appear defeated by life? Why are so many Christians in a financial mess? All the while the Word is there, gathering dust on some coffee table while the world falls in around the believer.

God made a way for you and me to be able to rest without fear of a devastating attack. He provided His written word to protect and guide us through the uncharted sea called life. But we need to wrap ourselves in it to keep from drifting away into dangerous territory.

I learned a great lesson from the otter that day. There's a reason it appears so carefree in the midst of the kelp fields. It is secure.

Looking for a little security? Try wrapping yourself in the word of God today.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# THE LOVE OF MY LIFE

She is the love of my life. I love to spoil her, buying her nice things and adorning her with special items that only accentuate her natural beauty. I take care of her the best I know how. If she has even the slightest scratch I smooth it out for her. I love spending time with her. And vain as it may be, I love the way other guys look at me when they see me with her. She is so special to me, and I believe God gave her to me.

She is my Jeep.

Okay, so maybe the relationship sounds a bit unhealthy. But you can keep your therapy and your gentle words of wisdom to yourself because I love my Jeep. I prayed for this Jeep during a time when I didn't have the financial resources to buy a vehicle. And God literally gave it to me.

## OVER THE EDGE

It is a Jeep Wrangler, the Sahara edition, with olive green paint, hard top and doors, manual transmission with a straight six, 4.2 liter engine. I love to take it for a drive with the top and doors off, with a sizzling Florida sun shining down on my bare shoulders. Life is good in such moments. Life is very good.

Occasionally I will need to take my Jeep in for some work. God has given me a friend who is an ASE certified mechanic and who is kind enough to take care of my baby for me. I trust his work because of the relationship we have, and I know his expertise as a mechanic. As a friend, I would trust him with my life. So letting him work on my vehicle is no big deal.

One hot afternoon I sat on a stool in his shop and watched as he worked under the hood. We talked casually, but as the moments passed I became more and more anxious about what he was doing to my Jeep. I watched in steeped concern as piece by piece he removed parts from the engine. He threw them over his shoulder where they landed in a growing pile. Finally, I could take it no more. I asked what he was doing throwing away all those parts. "Oh, you don't need them," he replied. "In fact, it will run a lot better without them."

As close as we were, as many hours as we had spent together in Bible study and prayer, for all the conversations we had had, something inside me still questioned what he was doing to my Jeep. It was really starting to eat at me, and I was torn. I didn't want to say anything, but I was honestly getting pretty concerned about all those parts lying on the shop floor.

I bit my tongue, but I felt like he was way out of line. He hadn't even asked me if I felt comfortable with this

open-hood surgery he was executing. I was sure he was making a mistake, but I didn't want to offend him. So I just sat there in shocked silence.

Over the next forty-five minutes he tweaked and turned this screw and that, fine tuning the engine until it purred like a contented kitten. It was a work of art. In all the time I had owned my Jeep, it had never run so well.

In spite of my fears and misgivings, the truth is my friend knew exactly what he was doing.

Every now and then I find myself in a place where I realize something isn't right. It's not working the way it should. When I slow down and listen I can tell there needs to be some major work in my life.

So I take my heart to the Master Mechanic, to the One who knows and understands my soul better than anyone. He takes me to His shop and begins to work on me.

As I observe this process in my life, I am often disturbed to see the things He is taking away from me. I sometimes argue with Him and question His authority. I'm shocked when I view the pile behind Him. How will I ever live without those things He has taken away? I get this sinking feeling my life is never going to be as good as it was.

And thankfully it isn't. It's better.

God looks into my life and says "You don't need this or that." In His kind gentle voice He says "Trust me, your life will run so much better without it." In that quiet moment of surrender I begin to realize my life is better for all He takes away. I find a freedom and joy from the touch of His wise hand upon my life, removing the junk that doesn't belong in me, one of His priceless creations.

## OVER THE EDGE

In spite of all my fears, the truth is, He knows what He is doing. I don't have to understand what needs to change. I just need to trust Him because of the relationship we have. I don't have to comprehend the process of taking all that stuff out of my life. I don't even have to like it. I just have to submit. I submit my life to the One who made me and knows exactly how I should run. It is ludicrous to doubt my Maker and Creator, yet I do it so many times.

I don't have to understand my jeep engine or know how to fix it. I have a friend who is a master mechanic who can manage it for me. And I don't have to understand my heart or know how to repair it because I have a Friend who formed it and can take care of it for me.

If I will only let Him do the work.  
For the love of my life.

## CHAPTER NINE

# DESERTS AND DIAMONDS

I walked through the narrow tunnel leading into the center of the volcano with my heart pounding. I wasn't afraid the mountain would erupt, but the steep incline left me out of breath. The dramatic view from the top of this precipice had enticed me to forgo a lazy day on the beach and to hike to the top of Diamond Head. This long dormant volcano sits like a sentinel overlooking Waikiki, Hawaii, and the ocean beyond.

From a distance, this monolith appears covered with rich green tropical vegetation, well watered from Pacific storms. But the view that greeted me as I stepped into the light inside the crater was anything but lush.

I had entered a desert. There was little grass growing, and what remained looked thirsty for even a drop of moisture. Scrubby, thin bushes were scattered across the

## OVER THE EDGE

crater extending scrawny limbs into the hot dry air. The inside of the crater was a place of death far different from what had appeared on the exterior walls. Apparently, storms blowing in from the sea would drop their rain on the sides of the mountain. But the opening at the top did not allow the blowing winds to deposit much of their life giving water on the floor of the volcano.

I paused, took a long drink from my water bottle, and considered the path before me. It was rough and narrow, dusty and rocky from the bottom to the top. I could see groups of people picking their way up the steep sides of the volcano. They looked like tiny pack animals winding their way along the zig-zagging paths. But there was only one way from where I was to where I wanted to be. And that path was the only route. I stepped out and plodded toward my goal.

Sweat and dust mingled together forming a light coating on my face and neck as my camera strap ground into my shoulder. I vacillated between determination and a longing to quit as I picked my way up the rock. There was no benefit to quitting, to sit for long hours in the heat of the sun with no shade. Relief was at the top in the shade of a bunker built during World War II to provide protection for Honolulu far below.

Often the path to the top of the mountain leads us through a desert; a place of pain and trial where we are tempted to give up. Ironically, the desert is sometimes exactly where God wants us to be. There are lessons to be learned in the desert, lessons about who we are and who God is that cannot be learned by living on the top of the hill.



Deserts can appear in our lives in the form of a lingering sickness or a financial distress. They take the form of relationships that crumble, of a job that has become drudgery, or of periods of loneliness and pain. We find ourselves caught in such moments, and we wonder if God is aware of our need. We sometimes doubt if He is listening to the feeble cries from our thirsty throats. And if you are like me, sometimes we even get angry at God in the midst of such circumstances.

But God is more than aware of our needs. It may be that God has intentionally led you to a place of need so He can do a work in your life. He led the nation of Israel into the desert and then made them hungry so they would learn He could provide them with food. And provide He did, in such a way you or I would have never imagined. He made a mysterious substance appear on the ground every morning so they could eat and be filled. They called it manna which literally means “what is it?” No one had ever seen anything like it. Who could have guessed God would meet their need that way? Only the One who created the need in the first place.

We pray many times as if we are letting God in on a secret, as if He is unaware of our need. We beg and we plead and we wear ourselves out, pounding our fist before God, believing we might get His attention and make Him aware of our difficulty. Then maybe, just maybe, He will bring us some relief. We spend so much time and energy trying to get out of the desert when all the while God wants to meet us in the middle of our desolation and make Himself more real to you and me.

His purpose is to reveal Himself as the Provider. If I had never been sick, I would never have known God

## OVER THE EDGE

could heal me. If I had never known a financial need, I would never have known that He could provide monetary resources for me. If I had never struggled in my relationships, I would never have known God could meet the deepest needs of my heart.

The path you are on right now may lead to a desert. Follow anyway. God knows the way. He knows your need. And He is preparing a provision that will not only get you to the top, but will let you enjoy the view once you get there.

My heart was racing wildly, this time as much from excitement as the rugged trail beneath me, as I finished the final steps to the top of Diamond Head. The cool wind blew hard into my face, and I smiled as I looked out over the city of Honolulu spread out below, the ocean licking the sand in waves of white on beaches even whiter.

Behind me lay the desolation of the desert; before me, the promised provision.

And within me... the satisfaction of lessons learned along the way.

CHAPTER TEN

## STILL WATERS

*Note: No animals were permanently hurt in the production of this devotional.*

**I**t was shortly after 8:00 p.m. when my friends arrived with their goldfish. They had asked me to care for the finned creatures while they were gone on an extended trip. How hard could it be? Normally the dime store goldfish spent their carefree days in a sparkling clean 50 gallon tank complete with night light and filter assembly. It was the Taj Mahal of fish tanks.

I assumed the half dozen fish would be just as comfortable in a smaller 5 gallon tank. I had set one up in anticipation of the night they would make the move to my trailer court tank. Finally, my friends brought over the fish, the food, and the filter.

## OVER THE EDGE

We poured the fish into the smaller tank, and they began to effortlessly swim around their new home. We hooked up the filter from the large tank, primed it and plugged it in. With a cough and a sputter the motor began to circulate the water from the intake tube, through the carbon filter, and down a little plastic shoot back into the tank. The flow appeared sufficient, and I was confident I would not have to hassle with green stuff growing on the sides of the aquarium glass.

After several mugs of coffee and almost three hours of casual conversation, I said good-bye to my friends. Being the responsible adult, I went to check on the fish to see how they were adapting to their new environment. I was surprised to see they appeared to be quite active, though it was after 11:00 at night. It seemed odd that they were swimming with so much effort.

Upon closer examination, I realized the filter assembly was pulling so much water through the system it was creating a massive current. The filter was made to be on a fifty gallon tank, and I was using it on a five gallon tank. The tiny fish were giving it all they had to keep from being sucked into the filter. Their eyes were bulging. Their mouths were pumping open and closed in an effort to get more oxygen to flow over their straining gills. Their little fins were stroking like crazy to keep from meeting death by carbon filter.

Hurriedly, I turned off the pump, stopping the flow. All of the fish fell to the bottom of the tank and lay motionless on the floor. I began to wonder if it was physically possible to do goldfish CPR. I thought they were all dead they were so still. The reality was they were

completely exhausted. They had been on a water wheel treadmill at high speed for 2 hours and 47 minutes.

For the record, none of the fish died from this experiment gone awry, although I imagine a few were pretty sore the next day.

The problem was that the smaller tank, the new environment they were living in, was not intended to handle that much flow of water. The fish nearly died.

God intended for you and me to live in His presence. Living in the presence of God means we live our lives with an awareness of God being in full control of even the smallest details in our lives. In His presence there is comfort, there is peace, and there is joy. And in His presence there is an amazing rest that comes as we realize God is at work all around us. We don't have to worry about a thing when we understand God is taking care of all the details.

Our problems escalate when we try to live our lives in an environment in which we were not intended to live, outside of the presence of God. It nearly kills us, and sometimes does. We try to fill the emptiness with all kinds of activities which only wear us out, leaving us unsatisfied, and searching for something new to fill the void. We worry about things as if God was unaware. We stress out over finances as if God was unable to meet our needs. Over and over we repeat the cycle until we are completely exhausted. We look for someone to give us CPR, while swimming as hard as we can against a gushing, overwhelming flow of trials.

The problem is, we are not living where God intended us to live. We are in an environment that is just not able to handle the flow of difficulties that run

## OVER THE EDGE

through our lives. Like those goldfish, we are frustrated, defeated, and exhausted from trying to swim against the flow.

The correct environment is living in the presence of God. Living in God's presence is like living in the 50 gallon fish tank, the big one. When we are surrounded by the presence of God, the same amount of trials can flow into our lives but we are not overwhelmed. Troubles come and go, but we don't falter when we are living in the presence of God. We will have trials. It is a fact of life. When we are living apart from God, the same trials flowing through our lives leave us completely exhausted, barely able to hang on. The problem is not our circumstances. The problem is we are not living where God intended us to be, living in the awareness of His presence.

Are you exhausted? Have you been swimming against a current you were never intended to swim against? The good news is there is peace in the presence of God. You can enjoy the presence of God by acknowledging your need of Him, giving Him your burdens, putting your trust and hope solely in His loving care. Ask Him to give you an awareness of His presence in your life. Learn what it means to know God and to be known by Him. Spend time meditating on His word. Spend time in prayer. Spend your life just loving Him, knowing Him, being with Him as He is with you.

Living in the presence of God is living with an assurance of God's love for you and His ability to keep it all under control. What an amazing place it is.

Come on in. The water is still and calm in the presence of the Great I Am.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# GUNS AND GROCERIES

I glanced to my left, and through the crowd I got my first glimpse of the man with the gun. Tall, with dark skin and even darker eyes, he was dressed in black from his rumpled shirt to the dusty military style boots. Even his hair was black; short cropped, out of place. I caught my breath, froze, and turned away. I pretended to look at a magazine rack while searching for him out of the corner of my eye. I was far more concerned about the gun in his hands than the condition of his clothing and hair. He held an AK-47 machine gun with one hand gripping the barrel and the other inches away from the trigger. His eyes darted back and forth through out the room.

It was a surreal scene as the crowd milled about me, seemingly oblivious to the menacing figure commanding my attention. They were used to it. I wasn't. In Panama

## OVER THE EDGE

City, Panama, machine gun toting guards at grocery stores were the norm.

I tried to imagine the armed force exhibited at the local bank if a mere grocery store carried with it the equivalent of the National Guard. It was definitely a deterrent for crime. If I had been so inclined, there was no way I was going to sneak a candy bar out of this place. No way.

I could imagine the scenario. Casually I slip the candy bar into the left pocket of my cargo shorts. As I glance toward the guard I am appalled to discover he is looking back at me. A bead of sweat forms on my brow and trickles down my temple. I smile a thin smile and nod. He smiles a thin smile and nods back. I take a few steps toward the door. He takes a few steps toward the door. I break into a run. The guard plants his feet so as not to be thrown backward by the kick of the gun as he fires off several rounds into my backside.

Most times I would consider a man with a gun to be a bad thing, especially if he is wearing black from head to toe. But when the man is a guard and is doing his job, it is actually a great thing. I am protected by him, and because of his presence, I am encouraged to do the right thing. There is a combination of fear and respect that works together in my consciousness. And rightfully so.

Some people speak of God as if His love frees us from the responsibility of respect and reverence. He certainly is loving, and all of His actions in my life are motivated out of His love for me. But God is also to be feared and respected. Throughout the Bible we see examples of a God who gets angry with sin, a God who sets a high standard of holiness, and then calls His people



to live by that standard. Those who choose to follow His commands enjoy the blessings that come with being in a right relationship with Him. Those who do not live by that standard experience His judgment.

At the grocery store I did not have to fear the guard turning his gun on me for no reason. He was there to protect me, to encourage me to obey the laws of the land, and to correct those who chose not to.

I have never stolen a candy bar and had no intention of doing so. The presence of the guard simply motivated me to stay on the right path, to do the right thing because it was the right thing to do.

I can't help but wonder if the reason so many Christians don't act like Christians is because they do not live with an awareness of the presence of God in their lives. God is with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. And He calls us to a life of righteousness. Regardless if we are aware of Him, He is aware of us. He sees all we do or do not do. He sees the sin we allow into our lives and then flippantly dismiss as no big deal. He sees the way we turn away from meeting needs in other people's lives with a casual, cold excuse of not having enough time. And He sees the heart that turns back to Him in repentance. He sees it all, understands it all, knows it all, and loves us any way.

Psalms 91:1 says "He who dwells in the secret place of the most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty." Remember those other shoppers who went about their shopping with little concern about the guard with the gun? They were experiencing the benefit of shopping in the presence of the security guard. There is a peace that comes in living in the presence of God

## OVER THE EDGE

Himself. It is a peace that says Someone knows me and is watching over me. He is protecting me from harm and encouraging me to do the right thing. I don't have to be afraid of Him even though I should fear Him. I choose to do the right thing because I fear the repercussions of my sin. However, that peace is only for those who are living in a right relationship with God. I can understand why some people think of God only as an angry, mean God. Most likely it is because they know they are living a life contrary to what He expects of them. They are aware they have done the wrong things. And because of that they know they are going to be judged one day.

If you see God as an angry God, then I have great news. The Bible says we do not have to live in fear. God Himself made a way so we could be forgiven for our sins and know His love and grace instead of judgment. That way is actually a person, Jesus Christ. The Bible says Jesus Christ died for us to pay the penalty for our sins. The Bible also says whoever believes in the name of Jesus will be saved. It may seem hard to comprehend, but it is true. When we acknowledge our sin before God, and ask Him to forgive our sin, accepting the death of Christ on our behalf, we can be forgiven. We can have a real, personal relationship with God Himself.

Our perspective on who God is completely changes when we are in a right relationship with Him. He is a God who loves even the most unlovely of people. We live in the presence of a God who is full of mercy and grace and yet full of justice at the same time.

I am glad to tell you I am still in a right relationship with the guard at the grocery store in Panama City. I'm quite sure he does not remember me as well as I

## GUNS AND GROCERIES

remember him. But I imagine if I were to see him again I would smile and nod my head in his direction. And I imagine he would return my glance with his charcoal eyes, then smile and nod his head as I worked my way to the check out line, candy bar in hand.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

# DIVING DEEPER

The water was clear and warm as I stepped off the deck of the dive boat located a few miles off shore of Florida's Gulf coast. I swam over to the anchor rope, adjusted my mask and secured the regulator in my mouth one final time. Gradually I slipped beneath the surface of the calm salt water. In a moment I was completely enveloped by the sea. The noise on the surface was replaced by the serenity of the ocean deep. It was a place of stillness where the sense of weightlessness soothes away the cares of a busy world.

This was my first dive after completing a PADI dive course a few weeks earlier. It was with a sense of wonder mixed with anxiety that I began to work my way down the anchor line to the sea floor thirty feet below. At the bottom waited a world I had read about and seen in movies and pictures since I was a child. I felt exhilarated.

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It was the fulfillment of a dream to experience the discovery and wonders of an open water dive.

Hand over hand I worked my way down the line, closer and closer to the bottom of the sea. After a few feet I noticed a pressure building in my ears. Often, when descending in the pool during the training sessions, I had felt the same pressure. If I descended too quickly, the air in my inner ear would not equalize enough, and a searing pain resulted. The only recourse was to slow the descent and pause before the pain became too great. The key is to stop when you feel the pressure building. If you do not, you will reach a point where the pressure outside is so great the inner ear physically can not adjust. At that point the searing pain will overwhelm you and any further descent will cause irreparable damage.

You have to stop, wait, and adjust. It's called equalizing, and it's the only way to avoid the pain that comes when the barometric pressure on the outside becomes greater than the pressure on the inside.

Slowly, but surely, I made my way down the anchor line, stopping often to equalize the pressure. It seemed like an eternity before the sea floor finally came into view. It had taken me longer than most to get to the bottom, but I had made it. And it was everything I had hoped it would be.

Schools of brightly colored fish swam around me as I settled carefully onto the sandy bottom. I smiled broadly while clenching the mouth piece between my teeth. I watched as bubbles from my breathing spiraled toward the surface far above. It didn't matter to me that it had taken me a long time to make my descent. I was enjoying every moment in this blue-green fish bowl. For the next

30 minutes I worked my way around a sunken barge, marveling at one hundred pound grouper, and shrimp so tiny you could hardly see them hiding between multi-colored coral and other sea life.

Time passed quickly in that sunken world, and it was with a sense of regret I noticed the time. My dive watch indicated it was time to return to the surface.

Sometimes life is like diving. In our relationship with God, He often calls us to go deeper than we've gone before. But along the way we find His plan leads us to a place where we are uncomfortable. The pressure builds, and we don't know what to do. It is in that moment we must learn the discipline to stop, wait, and adjust to what God is doing in our lives.

It is a spiritual equalization of sorts; learning the discipline of stopping, waiting on God. This allows the Holy Spirit to minister to us on the inside so we are able to deal with the pressures on the outside.

God said to be still and know He is God. But how many times do we allow our schedules to become so full there is little opportunity for us to hear the still small voice of God? It is not possible to go deeper with God at a frantic pace. The only way some can find time to rest is if they put "rest" on their "to do" list. That's insanity. Yet time and again we find ourselves in the position of pain from not taking the time to come apart and adjust to what God is doing in our lives. The pressures of life become unmanageable. Sin issues remain unresolved. There is little spiritual strength to fight the battle. Running from one spiritual conference to the next, busy with every imaginable program of the church, and reading every self-help spiritual guide available, we find ourselves

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exhausted, frustrated, and empty. The one thing missing in our lives is a sense of stillness before a holy God.

Even Jesus, God the Son in human form, took time away from the pressures of the crowds to whom He was ministering. How arrogant of us to think we don't need to do the same.

The path to going deeper in your relationship with God will require that you learn the art of being still before Him. This means making rest a priority in your life, of learning to be quiet before God so you can hear Him speaking to you. You must learn to stop, wait, and adjust spiritually before a God who is never in a hurry. It means clearing your calendar of the busyness cluttering your life so you can hear when God is speaking to you. It means being available for the work He wants to do in and through your life.

Some will tell you when you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on. But at the end of this rope is the anchor, Jesus Christ, who is the one stabilizing factor in your life. Where are you on that rope? Are you moving too fast? Do you need to slow down? Right now, set this book down and take a moment, one quiet moment, to be still before God. Listen to what He is trying to say to you. Spend a quiet moment in His word and in prayer to be refreshed, renewed, and ready to face the pressures coming your way.

It's a spiritual discipline necessary if you want to go deeper with God.

Stop, wait, and adjust.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# THE SUMMER OF '68

It was the summer of '68. I was three years old, and life was good. Bob and Grace used to baby sit my brother, sister and myself at their place located on the edge of the small mid-western town we called home. What great memories I have from those crazy summer days. It was there I got my first spanking for playing the piano. Seems I just wouldn't quit when I was told to stop. Then there was the Yogi Bear punching bag at least a foot taller than I, looming over me like a giant Weeble Wobble. There were pony rides and summer baseball games to attend. There were endless fields to be explored for rattle snake tails and Indian arrow heads. My life was a kid's dream.

Our kind babysitters had two kids of their own, Rod and Jill, both several years older than I and as

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mischievous as they come. From my three year old perspective, they were larger than life.

Summer time in southern Michigan could be oven hot and oppressively humid. The weather could make your skin feel like you do when you eat a fresh baked cinnamon roll and then lick the frosting off your fingers. You are always sticky. So in the heat of summer we would don our cut off shorts, turn on the lawn sprinkler, and run through the ice cold well water spraying through the air. The sprinkler was shaped like a puffed up, oversized golf ball. But instead of dimples in the ball, there were holes for the water to spray out like some sort of crazy fountain. We would laugh and play, chasing one another through the goose-bump producing shower.

One particularly steamy day we were lined up in the grass waiting for Rod to turn the hose on so the games could commence. Rod pretended to turn the water on. To our dismay, no water came out of the golf ball. Rod hollered to the group “There must be a worm stuck in one of the holes.” Naively, I ran over to the sprinkler to inspect it, expecting to find a night crawler of epic proportions jamming up the holes. With a great sense of anticipation I crouched down on all fours to get a good look at the cause of our predicament. At just the moment I got my eye right down on the sprinkler, Rod cranked the water on full blast, effectively giving me an eyeball enema. I can still feel the blast of the frigid water under my eyelid. I blinked hard, jumped back, and looked over to Rod, hoping he noticed the worm had apparently gotten out.

Unbelievably, I fell for this trick over and over again.

For whatever weird, warped reason, I trusted Rod. I guess as children it is easier to trust others. It's only when we get older and loaded down with life experience that trust becomes more difficult.

As an adult, I find I still have the same unjaded sense of curiosity I had as a child. I am too quick to believe and too slow to question. I am an easy pick if you want to pull a practical joke. But it is that same simplicity which makes my personal relationship with God the cornerstone of my life. I like being quick to believe and slow to question. I like seeing the way God works miracles in my life. I'm just crazy enough to believe He loves me and always has my best interest at heart. If growing up means losing that trust, then I'm content to be a child.

I wonder if that is why the Bible tells us when we come to God we must come to Him as a little child. We must believe He is believable. We must trust He is trustable. He is. God will not play games with our minds. God will never pull a practical joke on us, nor will He laugh at us when we fall down. Instead, as a father, He is quick to pick up His children, to hold them, to encourage them, to be there for them. And when He says something, it is always truth.

Jesus said "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:17) Isn't it interesting He starts the sentence with "I tell you the truth"? It's as if He is reminding us we don't have to question it. It's true whether we feel like we can trust it or not. It simply is. And the truth He is trying to convey is that when we turn our lives over to God we must become like children. We

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come to him as naive, trusting, and gullible children who believe what God says is true. It is when we give ourselves to Him in child-like trust that we find the life He intended for us to have.

I will admit there are times when the circumstances seem overwhelming, and I find my faith faltering. Sometimes I come to God with a leery eye and my head cocked just so, saying to Him, “I don’t know if I can trust you.” In my heart I want to trust Him but in the past I’ve been so burned by other people that I tend to view Him the same way. Even though He has never let me down, I remember the individuals who have broken a trust with me and transfer those characteristic to Him. In those times I’ve found God to be an amazingly patient Father. I hear Him say to me “My child, I love you. I understand you more than you know yourself. And I will not let you go.” He patiently draws me back to Himself and proves again and again He is worthy of being trusted.

I’m older now and in some ways wiser. It will be a long time before I will put my eye down on a golf-ball sprinkler head again. But though I am older, I hope I never grow up when it comes to my relationship with God. For those who are learning to trust Him more there are clear benefits to being young at heart.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# THE ROMANCE OF HEAVEN

**T**he sky was just beginning to turn a rosy shade as the morning shook off the dark gray blanket of dusk from her evening slumber. I paused and rubbed my eyes in the cool morning air. It was still half an hour before sunrise, and I could barely see the break between the surf and the sand as I made my way along a deserted stretch of beach in southwest Florida.

There's a romance to the ocean; a long slow dance of tides and sand, of salt laden fog drifting in and out in heavy labored breaths. There's a peace to the water, the kind of peace felt when you are alone with the one you love.

I walk the beach for a multitude of reasons. Most are more important than the physical benefits I receive from the 6 mile trek. It is more a journey of the soul. Problems

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fade away in the morning light like the shifting of the breeze in the air. Life is reduced to its core elements of breathing out and breathing in. And with each salty breath the pressures of this hectic world seem to lighten by degrees.

The beach at dawn is also a place of discovery. With each step the sky brightens by a shade, and with its illumination I see more clearly the shells and shore life that abound. I find myself focusing more on the tide line. It represents the place of greatest discovery for me. There are no other footsteps here. Through the night the lapping of the waves have licked the coarse sand free of footsteps and deposited in their place a most interesting array of shells and sea life waiting to be discovered.

It is this anticipation of discovery that causes me to rise while the house is still dark and to venture out into the morning for this affair with the beach. My curiosity is aroused with each new step, the dawn illuminating just enough of the shore ahead to cause me to pursue a few more steps down the sandy pathway.

Occasionally I spy a remarkable treasure on the edge of the shell break in the surf. But my prize is just beyond my reach without getting my feet wet. Such dilemmas call for a higher degree of commitment. But with the trophy in sight, the motivation comes easily, and I find myself shunning my shoes and wading in, perhaps to pluck a Lightning Whelk shell from its watery domain. I hold the trophy high as if I had just discovered some long lost buried treasure. I shake the water off and examine it closely, thrilled to have found such a jewel in the midst of the more common crushed pieces. I roll it around in my hand for a minute looking at it from every angle. I then

tuck it away in my cargo shorts like a piece of candy from a small boy's hand. It's awkward to describe, but I get a silly sense of exhilaration when I discover a beautiful shell like that.

I know it sounds corny and probably not as manly as some would prefer, but I really enjoy this sense of discovery. It's wondering what is around the next bend, or what is just over the hill, that has driven me along this journey of life. And I have never been disappointed.

That same sense of curiosity is what keeps me returning to spend time in God's word. Every page I turn reveals an exciting discovery, a new idea or truth. I find myself wanting to read just one more chapter, just one more verse. And it is often with regret I must close its pages for another day and time.

This romance between God and me has been going on for longer than I've been on this earth. It is the romance of heaven as God whispers His name to those He loves through the pages of His love letters. I love to spend time there even more than I love the early morning walks on the beach. It is in these pages that I discover who I am in relationship to God. I discover truths about who He is and who I am and how the two of us were meant to be together. I discover how much He loves me. I discover I was never meant to be alone. I discover He longs so much for me to know Him that He gave His only Son, His most dearly loved Son, to die in my place so I could be forgiven of my sins and live with Him forever; a forever that begins now.

Sometimes, at the edge of discovery, you find a truth just waiting to be claimed but requiring a greater level of commitment than you've given before. Few seem to

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venture to this place, perhaps because of the inconvenience or the distractions of the hectic pace of our lives. But the rewards are immeasurable for those who are willing to kick off their shoes and get wet in the Word.

Spend time going a little deeper. Discover truths God intended for you all along. Venture in. A whole world is waiting for you to discover.

How about you? Have you ever gotten your feet wet, or are you still standing on the shore line deciding if it is worth it or not? It is worth it. Take the plunge. Immerse yourself. It is the difference between knowing about Someone and truly knowing Him; between knowing about being in love instead of truly loving and being loved beyond your wildest imagination.

The romance of heaven is waiting.

Feel like falling in love?



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# HOMeward BOUND

**T**he ice was building up again on the windshield, and I pulled the van to the side of the slush-covered road. Frustrated, I got out of the car and began scraping the windshield with a plastic cassette shell I had scrounged from beneath the seat. It was another delay in my journey to be with family for a holiday get-together. And I was determined to get there in time.

The road trip began uneventfully. After packing the sound gear in the back of the van and throwing in a few changes of clothes, I had left my home in Florida for a series of concerts and Christmas with family in Michigan. As I crossed the border from Florida to Georgia, I noticed it cooling down outside. I turned the heat on. To my dismay only cold air blew from the vents. Still clad in my shorts and T-shirt from the balmy 80 degree

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temperatures I was leaving behind, the cold front was obvious as I continued to drive farther north.

I decided to spend the night in a hotel north of Atlanta and get the heater fixed the next morning. When I awoke in the morning I found a thin layer of ice coating everything in sight. The service station found the problem with the heater. It was a blocked heater core and replacing the part would not be possible before they closed for the holidays. So I made the decision to press on, heat or no heat. I was going to be home for Christmas.

The rain continued to fall and freeze making the roads nearly impassable and bringing the holiday highway traffic to a standstill on more than one occasion. With no heat inside to warm the glass, the rain froze instantly on the windshield of my van. I could drive a maximum of two miles before having to stop and scrape the windshield. And since I lived in southern Florida where we rarely even experience a frost, I didn't have an ice scraper. I had to resort to the cumbersome, old, plastic cassette shell to scrape the ice away.

Hours passed. I finally crossed the border into Tennessee. In Chattanooga I stopped at a second hand clothing store and bought a stocking hat to keep my head warm. It was so ugly the sales lady insisted on putting it in a bag so no one would see me taking it out of the store. I had no gloves so I resorted to a pair of boot socks from my suitcase to keep my hands warm. A fleece blanket provided a little warmth to my legs, and I wrapped a towel around my neck like a scarf. I was in a battle to prevent hypothermia.

I was cold; cold like a bag of frozen broccoli. The windshield was frosting up on the inside. The temperature continued to drop with the falling rain. It took me twelve hours to drive from Atlanta, Georgia, to Nashville, Tennessee, normally a four hour trip. Finally, north of Nashville the freezing rain stopped, giving me relief from the windshield scraping duty, and allowing me to make a little bit better time.

I pressed on. What should have been a thirteen hour trip turned into twenty. I would stop occasionally at a rest stop, stumble across the parking lot, and stand inside the heated building trying to restore the circulation to my legs. But it didn't help much. It was painful to even move my lower body. There's cold and then there's dumb cold. I was clearly dumb and numb. But it didn't matter. I had one thing and only one thing on my mind - I was going to be home for Christmas.

You should have seen the look on the officer's face when he pulled me over in Quincy, Michigan. By now it was 1:43 in the morning. It was fifteen degrees outside and not much warmer inside the van. I guess I was weaving between the lines a little, and his natural assumption was I had just left a bar somewhere. I'm sure what he saw when he looked in my window would have suggested he was right. I was still wearing "The Hat" along with the rest of the stylish can-I -please-get-some-heat winter wear. I was so cold I could not open the glove box to get the registration and proof of insurance without shuffling around the front of the van to the passenger side and turning the little knob with both numb hands. At that point I seriously considered asking the kind officer if I could sit in the patrol car and warm

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up while he filled out the paperwork. I just wanted out of the icebox on wheels. I could not feel my feet past mid-shin. I really couldn't feel much of anything. I was beyond pain.

But I was going home, home where it was warm, home where my family was waiting for me, home where I could finally rest from this incredible journey.

And that, in a sense, is what this life is all about.

We are going to have troubles. Life is a journey, not a destination. The sooner we understand this, the sooner we can put our trials into perspective. You see, we are merely working our way home. Jesus said in this world you and I will have trials. But take courage, He has overcome the world. And in another passage He reminds us He has prepared a place for us so ultimately, where He is, we can be also.

The point is this. We are not home. This is not the end of the road. The problems we face today are temporary. While difficult, they are just trying days in a journey of a lifetime. Like sheets of ice they will eventually melt away. And we will make it home.

In case you are wondering, I did not get a ticket. The only thing the officer got was a good laugh. I was able to get the heater fixed a few days later and, most importantly, I made it home.

And so will you.

See you when we get there.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# THE REFUGE AND THE REFUGEE

I squinted as the sun poured through the windshield, and swirls of dust settled around us as the van came to a stop inside the gate. I sat in the front passenger seat, my open window providing some relief from the summer heat, as I peered out at the rickety structures making up the Bosnian refugee camp outside the city of Rijeka, Croatia. Paint peeled from the buildings and the boarded windows gave evidence of years of neglect and disrepair. Even more haunting were the looks on the faces of the women and men who gathered around our vehicle, extending hands holding buckets and empty plastic liter bottles. Even without speaking their language I could understand the urgency of their situation. We soon discovered they were in desperate need of water. From what we could gather, the government had failed to pay

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the water bill, and so the water to the entire camp had been shut off.

It is an irony that the best intentions of providing a safe harbor for these people displaced by war had resulted in creating a prison for them. Unable to leave the grounds, their sentence was to live in this camp until it was safe to return to their homes, if they even had a home to return to.

The camp consisted of a series of buildings, barrack style, and a larger building for serving the food. A small, one-roomed structure once served as a school for the children. But with the children now bussed out each morning the building sat empty and abandoned like the families who called this camp home. Its windows were broken, and graffiti covered the walls.

I stepped out of the vehicle and was met by a young boy named Dobolik who motioned me to follow him. I took off after him having no idea where he was leading me. We passed row houses, and I looked inside the open doors, curious as to what it was like to live inside the dilapidated structure. The furnishings were sparse at best. The small rooms were dark and uninviting. I could make out an occasional worn sofa or folding chair.

We passed another boarded up, abandoned building and wound our way around back of it. Bits of toilet paper mingled with pieces of trash on the hard packed earth. Flies buzzed in my face as we worked our way towards the woods.

Entering the forest brought a welcome change in scenery, and the coolness in the air brought a relief from the heat. My guide bounded on ahead, occasionally stopping and glancing back at me with a glint in his eyes

that said “hurry up, you’re lagging behind.” He was anxious to get to what it was he wanted to show me. I hurried to keep up, ducking my head to avoid hitting the low lying tree branches. I wondered if it was even safe to be wandering away from our group. Finally, the path opened to a large parking lot which the children apparently used for playing soccer. It appeared the lot was once used for a toll booth. But the booth now sat silent, and there was no sign of traffic on the adjacent road.

“This is it?” I thought to myself. “This is what he was so excited to show me? An old abandoned parking lot with weeds growing up here and there through the cracks?” And then it hit me. This was all he had. He was showing me the one thing he could call his own.

For a few moments we sat on the edge of the lot and tried to communicate using gestures and the handful of Croatian words I had learned. He couldn’t have been older than twelve but claimed he was seventeen. His thin features and tanned skin reflected maturity beyond his years, an aging of the soul from enduring the hardships of living on the run, making a way in an often hostile world.

In all my travels, I don’t know when I have felt such loneliness. Even writing about it brings back a sense of loss for me. It was inescapable. I could turn my head away, but I would merely be shifting my focus to another desperate image, another hopeless face, another return look seeking relief. They had been uprooted from family and friends and planted in this dry, desolate place.

What I saw was the human face of hopelessness.

Ironically, I have seen that same face in cultures far more wealthy. Hopelessness, it seems, is a disease of the

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heart and can infect you no matter how much money you have in the bank or how nice the home is where you live. It disregards social status. It seeks the young and old alike and plays no preference in whom it will strike. Hopelessness is a longing in the soul for something better with the sense there is no way out.

But the good news is, there is a way out. Just as hopelessness is universal, so is the solution to hopelessness. And it can be yours.

Paul wrote in his letter to the believers in Ephesus about being hopeless. He reminds them that at one time they were without hope and without God. But now, because of Jesus Christ's death on the cross, those who once were abandoned can belong. It is the work of Jesus on our behalf. His death paid the penalty for all the wrong things we have done so we could be brought near to God. We can have hope in hopeless circumstances because our hope is in the person of Jesus Christ. If we are placing our hope in anything but Him, we will be let down. He is the only one who can truly give us life. The great news is He longs to meet us right where we are, no matter how hopeless the situation may seem.

Are you a refugee? No, not literally I hope. But do you feel miles from home? And have you lost hope that you will ever return? Do you feel like there is no way out? Try turning to the One who is the Hope for the hopeless.

Remember, hope has a name.

It's Jesus: the refuge for the refugee.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# STILL WILLING

**H**is name is Jack. I had never met him. I had never even seen a picture of his face. Yet I was perhaps more closely associated with him than any living person on the planet. And up until a moment ago I didn't even know his name.

It began over a year ago with a phone call jarring me from a work induced mental haze. I sat in silence and listened as a woman asked me a series of questions confirming who I was and wondering if I was still willing.

Still willing. Still willing to give a part of myself to help someone else live, to give someone a future and a hope at life. Still willing to be an anonymous bone marrow donor for someone who was in desperate need of a transplant, someone whom I didn't even know.

I would later learn that “someone” was sixty two years old and a male. That would be the only information

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given to me beyond the fact he had multiple myeloma and without a bone marrow transplant he would die. I was a match. Was I still willing to give?

I had been in the National Marrow Registry for several years. I had watched a friend of mine struggle and lose her battle with cancer. Joining the registry was a small way to honor my friend and to make a big difference in someone's life. As I spoke with the representative from the Red Cross the reality began to sink in.

It would be a privilege I would never regret.

The next few weeks were a blur of arranging for the blood work and related tests to confirm I was the best possible match. As the donor, my part of the transplant would be relatively easy compared with the difficulty the recipient would be facing. A bone marrow transplant requires the bone marrow of the recipient to be completely destroyed, leaving him without the ability to reproduce white blood cells to ward off infection. If for any reason the transplant did not take, he would die.

In my case, the hospital performing the transplant requested a stem cell transplant. This meant I would forgo the traditional surgical procedure in which a volume of bone marrow is removed from the pelvis area or other large bones in the body. Instead I would have a series of shots over a seven day period which would cause my body to produce massive amounts of stem cells; seed cells for the bone marrow. Through a process of filtering my blood, the excess stem cells would be collected, along with an amount of blood, and the entire package would be hand delivered by a courier to the recipient the same day.

The shots made me sick. I couldn't sleep. I felt nauseous and ached in my back and legs. Still, compared to how the recipient must have felt, I had little to complain about. When I did sleep I often awoke soaked in a cold sweat.

Finally the day came and the stem cells were removed from my body. I immediately began to feel better, relieved to be finished with my part of the transplant. The courier packed the bags in ice in a small cooler and left immediately for the airport. I had no idea where they were going, but I knew somewhere there was an individual who was desperately waiting for the package.

The news was sketchy for a while, but I later learned the recipient was doing okay. We exchanged letters through a contact at the Red Cross who was careful to screen them to remove any indication of our identities. Finally, after a year had passed from the date of the transplant both parties were able to communicate by mutual consent. We both consented.

That was when I learned his name. He called one evening just to say hello. We talked like old friends who were catching up on what had happened since we had last talked. Only we had never talked before. But inside of him was a part of me, new bone marrow sending new blood through his veins.

He was changed at a core level in his life. His blood type changed. Physically, he didn't look much different from before but the very blood flowing through his heart was radically transformed. And it affected every cell in his body.

In an odd way, I could fully relate to what he had gone through. See, I had had my own transplant several

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years before. Mine occurred when I admitted I was a sinner and asked God to forgive me for my sins. At that moment, God came into my life and changed me at a core level. It wasn't that my physical appearance was changed. But the blood flowing through my veins became His blood He shed on the cross on my behalf, to pay the penalty for my sins. My very nature was changed. I became a new creature. All things became new. Every cell in my body was changed when He transplanted Himself into me. Christ now lives in me. Imagine that.

And I was the one who was given a hope and a future.

The amazing thing is God is still willing to give of Himself to anyone who asks. Still willing. Still willing to pay the penalty for your sin and mine. Still willing even though He knows we don't deserve it. Still willing even though we live our lives as if He doesn't exist. Still willing to love with an indescribable love.

Christ was willing to endure a cruel death by crucifixion so you and I could have a new life in Him. And today, He is still willing to forgive, if only you will ask. To receive this transplant, you have to believe Christ died on your behalf to pay the penalty for your sin and accept His gift of life for you. It's really that simple.

I don't know how long Jack and I talked that night. Our conversations turned from family to our mutual love for the outdoors. We shared stories of how each of us came to the place in time where we became inseparable.

Later someone asked me if I would do it all again. I said the only thing that came to my mind.

"Still willing."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# MAN MO MANIA

**T**he smoke from the fires filled the air and clouded my vision as my eyes slowly adjusted to the dimly lit room. I quickly glanced around the chamber, desperately trying to make out any details I could find.

The windowless room was dark and much smaller than I thought it would be. Bee hive shaped spirals were suspended from the soot covered ceiling with red paper tags hanging from the middle of each one. It felt as if the walls and ceiling were closing in on me. I stooped forward trying to avoid striking one of the hundred or so cones hanging from the blackened ceiling as I picked my way through the cluttered room. Ahead of me, smoldering joss sticks burned, stuck in a box of sand at the base of the altar.

I wasn't expecting this at all. I had spent the morning walking the bustling streets of Hong Kong checking out

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various tourist traps and the antique district along Hollywood Road. The sky was bright but hazy as I worked my way from one shop to the next, more browsing than buying, exploring the markets and restaurants along the way.

I had stopped and had unfolded my tourist map, which was permanently creased and worn from riding in my back pocket. It was then I noticed I was near the Man Mo Temple. I figured it would be neat to visit a historic building and learn a bit of the history of the place from the time when the building was used as a place of worship. Besides, I was getting tired of walking, and perhaps they would have a visitor's center where I could sit down for a while.

When I ducked my head and entered the small door to the temple hall, I was shocked by what I beheld. It was only later I would learn the temple is one of Hong Kong's oldest and most famous. And clearly it was one of the most used.

I stood in a corner in the back of the room and processed what I was seeing. Through the dimly lit haze I could make out several Chinese women with bunches of joss sticks clutched to their chest, bowing repeatedly before the sculptured figurine at the front of the room. The joss sticks are incense sticks that when burned gave off a smoldering smoke, filling the air and coating the contents of the temple with a thin film of black. According to tradition, one lights a joss stick to make a wish for health, wealth, and happiness. On the right side of the room one of the temple workers gathered up some of the sticks that were no longer burning for one reason or another. To my left, I could barely make out an

ornately carved wood ceremonial chair enclosed in a smoke stained glass case.

The air was heavy with the incense and with something else I couldn't quite define. I felt uneasy and uncomfortable. I quickly made the decision that I did not want to hang around much longer. It wasn't just the smoke bothering me. It was the realization that people were putting all their hopes into burning a stick of incense in front of a sculpture of someone who died a long time ago, hoping for a chance at health and happiness; a chance, nothing more. No guarantee at all. I couldn't imagine living with so little assurance inside.

I could take no more. I turned and stepped outside, back into the light of the summer afternoon, and blinked my eyes to adjust to the brightness. The contrast couldn't have been greater. The light was so bright it almost hurt. I felt like I could breathe again. It felt free and open. I drew a deep breath, filling my lungs with the fresh air.

I was taken by the realization that as believers, we live in the light. We no longer have to walk in darkness because we place our hopes in the One who lived and died but rose to life again. The Bible says if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. To put it bluntly, we don't have to wish that maybe, just maybe, a burning stick will somehow grant us favor with a piece of stone sculpted to look like a dead guy. God makes us clean through the sacrifice of His Son, and gives us true life in the process. He is our hope. In Him we have all the things we truly need in life. We have a confidence in a personal relationship with the

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living God in the person of Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Many people claim to know the light but are not much better off than the ladies in the Man Mo Temple. They are going through the motions of living in the light, but the light has never changed their lives. They like to feel comfortable in its warm glow. They build beautiful buildings to hold the light, and go to those buildings every week or so to feel good about the light. They go through the motions of being religious and then go on their way, never letting the light truly, irreversibly, change their lives.

How about you? Are you in the light or in darkness? Has your life been changed, or are you trying to change yourself along the way, hoping somehow something you do would give you favor with something you don't even understand?

You can live in the light. You can be forgiven and have a real, personal relationship with God by admitting you are a sinner and accepting the sacrifice Jesus Christ made when He died on your behalf, to pay the penalty for your sins. You can understand what He meant when He said He came to give us life more abundantly than anything we could ever imagine.

You'll find yourself blinking in amazement at how bright it is when the air is clear of so much confusion and hopelessness. And you won't have to put your hope in a burning stick of wood.

Come on, step into the light.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# THE TRAIL OF TEARS

Fifteen minutes into the hike the first drops of rain broke through the canopy and fell against the back of my neck. As a drop of water trickled down my back, I turned my eyes upward and began to weigh the odds I could somehow stay dry. The odds were not good. Thick gray clouds obliterated the morning sun giving both a relief from the heat and a sickening realization I would likely be caught in a downpour. This was the typical climate of the area surrounding the narrow footpath on the Napali coast on Kawai.

The hiking trail, stretching eleven miles through some of the most rugged, uninhabited land anywhere in the United States, is legendary for humbling hikers. Today was apparently my day to be humbled.

The deluge fell. I stood under a tree hoping its branches would deflect the majority of the rain. I

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hunched over to try to keep my camera as dry as possible. In moments I was completely drenched. And then, suddenly the downpour stopped, and I ventured back onto the path to survey the damage.

The path was now a muddy stream as the water coursed its way from the steep hillsides down to the Pacific Ocean below. I paused, ringing out my shirt and marveling at how incredibly beautiful this area was. I had set out at 8:00 in the morning to see how much of the trail I could cover in the few hours I had before I would be picked up at the trail head entrance. My intermediate goal was to make it to the first beach two miles into the trail, and then decide what to do from there.

The trail began to decline, both literally and in condition, the farther along I went. It was never level. I was either climbing up or climbing down, and I was beginning to regret leaving my hiking boots at home. Of all the crazy things, I was wearing sandals.

I finally reached the first beach only to discover it was rocky and the surf much too dangerous for swimming. I decided to hike on up to some nearby falls.

An hour later, having trudged along a goat path for a strenuous mile and a half, I finally met another hiker coming toward me. I asked him, "How much further to the falls?" I was completely disheartened when he replied, "What falls?" I discovered I had somehow managed to get on the wrong trail. I had hiked arduously an hour in the wrong direction.

Frustrated, but still full of foolish enthusiasm, I stumbled back to the beach as quickly as I was able. I still wanted to fulfill the insane goal of reaching the falls and

making my way back to the trailhead before my ride returned to pick me up. I was possessed by the challenge.

An hour later I discovered the true trail to the falls, a trail like none I had ever hiked. If it was maintained, I had no idea the last time someone had maintained it. I found myself in knee-deep mud, which nearly sucked the worn out sandals off my feet. Wild bamboo grew beside a swiftly moving river filled with rocks and boulders. I crossed the river several times that afternoon, often walking up and down the banks to find where the trail picked up on the other side. When the trail became too steep, I used tree roots to pull myself up. I did not see another hiker for the hour and a half it took me to reach the falls.

I was alone in paradise and stood motionless to take it all in. The falls were a spectacular sight and worth the hike (I think). Cool waters fell eighty feet into a clear pool full of large, black boulders. I sat in the cold water to rest my aching legs and feet while dining on my last sandwich.

I was now in the heat of the day, and I was completely spent. My legs were starting to cramp, and I was nearing heat exhaustion as I started toward home. Each step was laborious. I willed myself to keep moving, knowing if I stopped I might not be able to get moving again. My ride would be waiting and wondering what on earth had happened to me. Quitting was not an option. There was no one I could lean on, no one to carry me, and feeling sorry for myself wouldn't help either. It would only make things worse. My head hurt, my feet hurt, and my legs hurt.

I drank the last of my water. My breathing became labored and my mouth drier with each step. But I had

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one thing on my mind - finish this crazy hike and chalk it up in the lessons learned column. It wasn't fun any more. But no matter what it took, I was going to finish.

And I did. I hurt for days from the extreme trek. I later learned it had carried me 11 miles over one of the most difficult trails in the nation.

Sometimes, we are going to find ourselves in places we don't want to be, with challenges we don't want to face. Sometimes, there is no one to help, no one to carry the load with us, no one who seems to know we are struggling along to make it to the finish line. Sometimes, it's just not fun anymore.

The reality is, it would have done me no good to even entertain the thought of quitting. What good would quitting have done? And what good would complaining to the trees or the trail have done? The trail wasn't to blame. The trees didn't cause my distress. Further more, blaming myself would have solved nothing either.

Paul, in his letter to the church in Philippi, wrote, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal." (Philippians 3:13-14) He knew what it meant to endure great hardship. He had been beaten many times, had been imprisoned for his faith, had endured shipwrecks and more. Yet, he never gave up his desire to fulfill all God had called him to be and do.

It is in these moments that the best thing, the only thing, to do is to put one foot in front of the other and get on with it. Finish the race one slow, grinding step at a time. You've got to put the past behind you, strain toward what lies ahead, and press on.

## THE TRAIL OF TEARS

I made it. Many, many others have made it. And you're going to make it too; one simple step at a time.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

# PANAMA PANDEMONIUM

**I**t had been a long, uneventful flight, and my legs were stiff from sitting with my knees cramped against the airline seat in front of me. I rubbed my dry eyes and sighed as the stewardess finished the “seats-in-the-upright-position-and-tray-tables-up” speech. So many hours had passed since I left the Miami airport, headed for the heart of Central America.

I had slept fitfully for as long as I could. Frankly, I hesitate to call it sleep, this manner of sitting upright and leaning your face against the window of the plane for long stretches of time. In essence, I had been unconscious for short periods, interrupted by crying children and by thickly accented flight announcements from the cock pit regarding cruising altitude or the possibility of turbulence ahead. Hours ago I had finished the in-flight magazine, the catalog, and some foreign language paper left over from the flight before me. The

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boredom was beginning to get the best of me. I shifted my weight in my seat and stared blankly out the small window beside me.

The plane began the descent into the Tocumen International Airport in Panama where I was scheduled for a series of concerts at the United States' military bases. Not too much longer and I would be able to stretch my legs and get a breath of fresh air. I leaned into the window pane and tried to get a look at the city below. I was expecting a bustling airport with a thriving, metropolitan city sprawling around it. But to my surprise, where the city should have been there was only a scattering of trees and grass and a small collection of buildings making up the airport facility.

We were close enough now that I could make out the facilities clearly. I traced the landing strip with my eyes and did a double take when I saw the end of the runway. The scene jarred me from my stupor and shook the fog from my mind. I quickly sat up in my seat, squinted my eyes, and strained my neck into the window to get a better perspective.

Flashing lights on the emergency vehicles, and the large fire burning at the end of the runway raised goosebumps on my arms. Thick, black smoke rolled into the clear sky, all but obliterating the scene below. It was difficult to be sure, but it appeared a plane had not made the landing and the fuselage was now burning below.

Our plane continued to descend. But now, instead of looking forward to the arrival of our flight, I began to consider why they call the airport a terminal, as in "your flight will terminate in Panama."



What really confused me was the fact no one seemed to be talking about it. I could imagine the flight crew would not want the rest of us to panic, but surely they were aware of the chaos below. Surely this would explain the silence on their part in this regard.

My mind was reeling. By now the angle of our plane's descent had obliterated the view below, but I could still see the billowing clouds of smoke rising into the hot sky. A thick column of ash carried with it the hopes and dreams of countless families whose lives were suddenly shattered at the moment of impact on the tarmac below. I felt sick and wanted to be on the ground safely, away from the scene below.

I am reminded of another time when things seemed hopeless and helpless.

He was in his mid-thirties, much younger than most people who had his level of influence. He had enjoyed a remarkable career. He had an uncanny ability to know what people needed and then met those needs in amazing ways. His was the ultimate success story. Everyone wanted to be near him, to quote what he said, to describe in fascinating detail every word he had spoken and every remarkable thing he had done. His fame extended throughout the country.

Then, at the peak of his fame and popularity, it all came crashing down around him. Because of his prominence and influence, he upset individuals in high positions who sought to maintain their base of power and control. They hauled him before a judge on false charges. He was tried in a kangaroo court, and, in a shocking decision, was sentenced to death.

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The very people he was trying to help turned against him. He was beaten so brutally most folks would not have survived. Finally, in what was a sad epitaph to a remarkable life, he was executed.

But things aren't always what they seem.

I stepped out of the plane and began to make my way through customs, still pondering what I had just seen. Through the maze of check points, I approached my host and described what I had witnessed. He smiled, laughed at me, and then carefully explained the truth.

The area surrounding the airport facility is covered by a coarse, very tall grass. It grows so high you can get lost in it, and it is sharp enough to cut you to ribbons if you were to attempt to walk through it. A fire had broken out in the grass near the end of the runway, and emergency crews were trying to put it out. What appeared to be a plane crash turned out to be a grass fire of mammoth proportion.

Things aren't always what they seem.

His lifeless body was taken by a friend and placed in a cold, damp tomb. What few true friends he had began the process of grieving their personal loss. Over the next couple of days, things started to calm down, and life began to return to its routine.

Then, early one morning while the dew was still on the flowers in the garden where he was buried, there was an earth shattering event. Jesus Christ rose from the dead and in the process fulfilled the payment due as a sacrifice for your sin and mine.

The hierarchy thought they had won.

But things aren't always what they seem.

Friend, where are you in your life today? What circumstance are you viewing through all too human eyes? Have you reached the place where you feel your flight is ending in disaster? Things aren't always what they seem. And at just the place where you feel you can not go on, God can give you the grace and strength you need to make it another day. His ways are not our ways, His perspective is always better than mine. He only asks us to trust Him. Trust Him to understand our circumstances and situations that seem to be difficult but are really for our good. Trust that maybe, just maybe, He understands things differently than we do.

Things aren't always what they seem.



## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

# PLANE STUPID

The small, single engine plane decelerated, then flew even more slowly. I shifted uneasily in my seat as the pilot guided the plane straight into the 30-mph head wind. I pursed my lips and glanced nervously from the face of the pilot to the small window beside me. The ground was far below, and I wondered at what point the engine would turn silent and we would fall out of control.

The pilot was a friend of a friend, and I can't say I really knew him well. I was along for the ride, a pleasure ride across open skies in southern Michigan. We had spent the afternoon hopscotching from one small airport to the next, grabbing a greasy hamburger at an airport restaurant along the way. It was now evening, and the moon and a host of stars above illuminated the dark sky. Below, the lights of a tiny farming village pierced the

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darkness, revealing more of how high we were than any detail of the buildings beneath our wings.

The plane decelerated even more.

I love adventure, but I do not like feeling out of control. I sat quietly in my seat wondering to myself if this guy was even crazier than I was.

The plan was to fly the plane backward. That's right, backward. In order to do so, the pilot had to slow the engine speed to almost nothing. In theory it works like this: if the forward speed of the plane is less than the speed of an oncoming head wind, the force from the wind would make the plane fly backwards. The pilot must be able to maintain a minimum air speed with out stalling the plane. If the plane stalled, it would fall out of the sky in an uncontrolled dive. Most pilots would be able to restart the engine and pull the plane out of the dive... most of the time anyway. The question crashing around in my mind was whether this would be one of those times. I didn't want to find out.

I can't say I trusted the guy. In fact, I know I didn't trust him. I had to grit my teeth and hang on for the ride since I didn't know how to pilot the plane myself. I had no other option. I could have yelled at him that I didn't like the way it felt. I could have given him a discourse on how the unbearably slow speed of the plane was making me quite uncomfortable. But it would have been to no avail. I was not in control and hating every moment.

Then it happened. It felt eerie to me, an almost weightless feeling. The few clouds in the sky around us seemed to move forward as the plane began to fly backwards into the night sky. My stomach felt like it was in first gear while my body was going in reverse. I smiled

an awkward smile at the pilot, wanting him to think I was proud of him. Maybe then he would get the plane moving in the right direction. It was too quiet, and I sat there waiting for the audio warning signal to sound that we were about to stall.

The pilot beamed at his accomplishment. I forced a toothy grin back at him, trying to decide which one of us was the craziest; he, for pulling this stunt, or I, for riding along.

In life, most of us are merely along for the ride. We really don't know the Pilot well. We've heard good things about Him, and we know other people who have been in His plane. But our experience is limited, and we haven't spent enough time with Him to say we know Him. And because we do not know Him, to trust Him is unthinkable. And then, He pulls a stunt that leaves us breathless and wondering if we are going to survive. We want to cry out that we don't like the ride, but we know it won't do any good. We are not in control and hating every minute.

Some of you right now are in situations where you feel out of control. You feel like your plane is about to stall, and you are wondering how you can get out of this crazy ride. The pressures of this world are pushing against you, and even though your engine is still running, you can tell you are no longer going forward. Little by little you are slipping back, and you are wondering at what point you will be falling out of control.

The problem is not with the plane. The problem is not with the Pilot. The problem is that we do not know the Pilot well enough to trust Him.

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What can you do in situations like this? Get to know the Pilot. This is not the time to try to take the controls yourself. To put it bluntly, you do not have what it takes to fly this plane. Grab the controls yourself, and you can almost guarantee a crash and burn. But if you could get to know the Pilot better, you could learn to trust Him more and maybe, just maybe, enjoy the ride.

God has made Himself known very clearly in a flight manual called the Bible. This would be a good time to dust it off and spend some time reading it, learning who He is and how He relates to you and me. The amount of time you need to spend in His word is relative to the degree of stress you are facing in your current situation. The higher the anxiety levels, the greater the amount of time you should be spending in His word and in prayer. It's that simple.

It's more than theory. It's an equation that works.

You can know Him. You can trust Him. You can believe.

Now would be a great time to get to know the Pilot.



## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

# BODY BUILDING SECRETS

**W**hen I was a child, I used to have comic books that had an ad for a body building course by Charles Atlas. The idea was if I bought the course and applied the principles within I could have the body of my dreams. When I would go to the beach I could stand up to the bullies that used to kick sand in my face. And of course, all the beautiful women would want to be with me. Life would be just grand.

The reality was, I was nine years old and incredibly skinny. Even with a lot of work I would never have the things promised in the ad. Believe me, I tried. I've spent countless hours in the gym on some crazy notion that I really can have the Charles Atlas body. Even now, I am regularly going to the gym, lifting weights, and eating just

## OVER THE EDGE

the right amount of protein and nutrients. In the back of my mind, I still believe it can happen.

The truth is, in order for a muscle to grow it must be stretched beyond what it is able to bear. Tiny micro-fiber tears occur when the muscle is required to hold more than it is able. The individual muscle fiber cells are actually stretched so far they tear. When that occurs, over time the muscle will heal and will be stronger and larger than it was before. The idea then is to lift an amount of weight that will cause your muscles to be taxed to the max. This process of fatiguing the muscle is one of the keys to growth.

Interesting enough, one of the other keys to growth is complete inactivity. In fact, if you don't get enough rest, your body will reach such a point of fatigue you will actually begin to get weaker. During the period of rest the muscle is actually healing and growing stronger. If there is not enough time given for the muscle to heal before it is stressed again, then the muscle will begin to break down. Do this enough and your whole body will feel the effects with sleeplessness, increase incidence of sickness, and a general feeling of burn out, with no increase in muscle size or strength.

In the Christian life the same principles apply. God understands that both trials and rest are necessary for us to grow in our relationship with Him. And He provides both, in just the right amount for us to maximize our growth.

Imagine for a moment you are a muscle in the body of Christ, let's say the bicep on His arm. He looks down at you and thinks, "That baby needs to grow to keep up with the rest of the body's development." One day He

goes into the heavenly gym and decides to do some arm curls. He goes over to the rack, picks up a dumbbell and begins to curl it toward His chest. He lifts it up and lowers it to the starting position. Remember now, you're the muscle. You feel the blood flowing in with every movement of the weight. At first it feels good, but with every repetition you feel yourself growing tired. Just when you thought it was over, He sets down the weight and picks up a larger, heavier weight and starts the process all over again. At this point you are screaming. You are almost completely exhausted. You think you can't possibly take any more. And then He does one more repetition to take you to the place of complete failure.

It is then, and only then, He sets the weight down and walks away from the rack. You have been taken to a place of complete failure. But the growth has only begun. In the coming days He will let you rest. And in that time of rest you will heal. And when you heal you will find you are stronger than before.

I hate being taken to the point of failure. Who wants to be weak? I bristle at the thought. I want to be strong. But in order to get stronger I must first fail. And time and time again I find God taking me to the place of complete and utter failure as He works within me the purpose of His will for my life. He wants me to grow in Him. He realizes that for me to grow in Him I will need to fail along the way. He will even put into my life, circumstances in which I am set up to fail. Crazy as it may seem, I believe God wants me to fail. It is in the place of bearing more than I believe I can possibly bear, that I learn the lessons that mold me into the image of His Son.

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Thankfully, God is also clearly aware of the importance of rest as I grow in Him. He never works me out more than He should and always provides just the right amount of rest before the next session begins. Have you ever noticed your life is a series of trials followed by rest, followed by trials, followed by rest? There is stress, and there is rest. In those moments of rest we reflect on the lessons learned. God's direction and timing are exactly what we need to grow in Him.

I never did buy the Charles Atlas program. I never really got the body of my dreams. But I am growing. Little by little, I am becoming exactly what He wants me to be. And in the process I am learning more about the One who says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Now that's an ad that lives up to its claim.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

# SPRING TRAINING

**T**he sky was a deep blue with only a scattering of wispy clouds spread across the otherwise clear celestial canvas. Spring was in the air, and the warm breeze coming off right field brought a slow smile to my soul. It was the Texas Rangers versus the New York Yankees. Welcome to spring training baseball in southwest Florida. It was a picture perfect lazy afternoon. I was sitting in the shade a few rows from the top of the stadium, ninth seat in, picking roasted peanuts from their shells.

The batter shuffled to the plate, worked his cleats into the ground and began the stare down with the pitcher. The pitcher remained unfazed by the glare. He coiled back for the pitch, glanced quickly to first base and then released a fire burner toward the plate. The batter cranked it hard but completely missed the ball. Somehow

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in his effort, the bat slipped his grip. It flew through the air end over end like a giant 2x4 boomerang coming to rest in the stands off the left field line behind third base. I jumped to my feet. Peanut shells scattered everywhere. I stretched my neck and stood on my toes to see if someone had gotten nailed by the projectile. Amazingly, no one was hurt.

For a moment, the game of baseball was forgotten in favor of the new audience participation version of catch-the-hard-wood-projectile-without-brain-damage contest. The winner stood triumphantly to his feet, turned to face the audience, and lifted the bat high over his head like some sort of trophy for all to see. He was smiling and nodding coyly as if he knew all along he was going to catch a bat that afternoon. I suppose you could say he was beaming. It was a beautiful moment. We all applauded wildly for the fact the guy had somehow managed to catch a flying baseball bat without getting cracked between the eyes.

Slowly, a man with an I.D. tag hanging around his neck began to work his way through the raucous crowd toward our new found celebrity. To everyone's dismay, the official from the stadium approached the man and took the bat from his hands. The crowd went nuts. For my part, I booed along with the rest of the crowd but more in jest and in the spirit of having a good time at someone else's expense. The official was unfazed. The booing and hissing of the crowd didn't deter him one bit. Keeping his eyes straight ahead and ignoring the jeers from the crowd, he worked his way back to the dug out with the bat squarely in hand.

After giving the bat back to the batter, the official then picked up another bat and began retracing his steps.

The crowd cheered wildly again. But this time for a different reason and with a different tone to be sure. In one swift moment, the official had turned from villain to hero. He walked all the way back to the man in the seat behind third base and kindly handed him the replacement bat. The crowd continued to applaud. We laughed as the man in the seats again rose to his feet with the bat in his hands held high above his head.

I couldn't help but think about the man who had the dirty deed of retrieving the bat and replacing it with the spare. He seemed undaunted by the jeering, hissing crowd and now I understood why. He knew the end from the beginning. He knew he was doing the right thing and in time, the same folks who were booing and hissing wildly would eventually cheer him for his act. And even if they didn't, he was doing what he was told to do. It should be the same for you and me.

Have you ever gotten booed for doing what you were told to do? Ever felt befuddled by opposition to something good? Have you been confused by those times when you were involved in the right things, but for whatever reason your motives were questioned and nasty comments were made in your direction?

The right thing done in the right way, at the right time, is always the right thing, whether the rest of the world understands it or not. Sometimes we are going to get booed for doing what is best. Our motives will be questioned, and we will not be given the benefit of the doubt. It may even appear there are no benefits to doing what is right and true. When that happens, we need to

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keep our eyes straight ahead and finish the work we've been called to do. We can do this because we know we will soon hear the cheers of those who do fully understand.

Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Corinth to "stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:58) We need to get over the idea that we need approval to do what is right. Do what is right because it is the right thing to do. Understand some folks may not understand. Character is doing the right thing regardless of criticism from the peanut gallery.

The fact is, for the believer, every good work will eventually be rewarded. It may be the applause of heaven awaiting you. You may never reach a point where you hear it now. You may labor and toil and do all the right things but have nothing to show for it today. Dear friend, always remember your work is not in vain in the Lord.

It's the game of life, and you may be the official. The applause will come. For now it may be boos and hissing ringing in your ears. But stay in the game.

It's called spring training for a reason.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

# UNFOUNDED FEARS

The night was as dark as black felt, so devoid of light it felt claustrophobic. It was like standing in a closet with the lights off, enveloped in darkness. I had spent the evening with friends at their dairy farm a mile or so from my home. Feeling the need for exercise and some adventure, I had decided to make the trip home by foot. What I hadn't planned on were thick, low-hanging clouds completely obliterating the moon and any light it could shed on my path home.

As I left the security of my friend's yard light, I could feel the darkness wrap itself around me. I could barely see the dirt road ten feet in front of me. The trees and bushes hugging the sides of the road were more felt than seen.

I had walked this road many times during the daylight hours, often venturing out when I felt the need to stretch my legs after a long day in the office. The path was

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familiar to me, like an old friend. But now, in the darkness of night, I could hardly see the path. And it was anything but an old friend.

There were only three houses on the road, spread out over a mile of farmland and woods. I was well out of sight of my friend's house when I heard the snapping of a twig.

I stopped and strained my ears in the direction of the noise, my wide eyes darting back and forth, straining to see what caused the sound. My heart was pounding as I struggled to face this unseen foe. My mind recalled a story I had heard of someone who foolishly ventured out alone only to come up missing. I stared harder into the blackness, trying to make out someone or something lurking in the bushes waiting to jump me. In my mind, I could see the looks on my neighbors' faces when they realized I hadn't been seen in a few days. And then the police would start searching for my body, what was left of it anyway.

It was too late to turn back. The adrenaline had already kicked into high gear, and there was nothing to do but face this foe and deal with the consequences.

I would love to tell you my fears were justified, and I did get jumped but bravely fought them off. I would love to tell you all of my dread and apprehension was right on the money. But I would be wrong.

A cat walked across the road.

Now, I don't know who was scared worse: I, or the cat eyeing my hand which was holding the ten pound rock. My fears were unfounded, baseless, groundless, and untrue. As with so many other times in my life, I had jumped to reckless conclusions.

Have you ever found yourself in a place where you are afraid? Usually it comes at a time when you feel completely out of control. There are many kinds of fear: fear of failure, fear of being alone (and lonely), fear of rejection, fear of not fitting in, fear of what other people think about you, fear of saying the wrong thing, fear of not being able to help someone you care about. All of these issues, and many more, can bring a sense of trepidation to our lives.

So what do we do when the panic hits? The only thing we can do is turn it over to the One who understands our fears better than we know ourselves.

Fear represents a gross misunderstanding of the character of God, of who He is and how He relates to us. The Bible is very clear, God loves us. He knows us and ultimately wants us to become more like His Son. There is no problem so large He gets concerned and says, "I wonder how I will ever be able to solve that." There is no question too difficult for Him to answer. There is no need He does not know how to fill. He is all sufficient. He is aware of, and in control of, every situation. He is God.

Fear indicates that somewhere in my life, my understanding of who He is has broken down. Fear means I question His ability to meet my needs. The problem is not with God, it is in me. My human nature wants to meet my needs on my own. Fear occurs when I realize I do not have what it takes to meet my need and fail to trust God in the process.

Is there something in your life that has caused fear to grip your heart? Guess what, it is out of your control. But it is never out of God's control. Right now acknowledge

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to Him that you don't have what it takes to make it down the dark road on your own. Tell Him you need Him.

I take great comfort in the knowledge that God understands my fears. I imagine He chuckles when He watches me get all unwound over the simplest of problems. Yet even the greatest difficulties I face pale into insignificance in the light of His wisdom and understanding. The hard part is turning my fears over to Him.

I'm glad to say, I survived the long walk home and even learned a lesson or two. Most of my fears are unfounded. Everything looks different in the morning light of God's love.

And people and cats can really move when they want to.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

# THE CHRIST OF THE CHAOS

**T**he sky was dark and hot as we piled out of the back of the pickup truck and made our way to the open air arena in the heart of Santa Cruz, Bolivia. The crowds milling their way into the grounds of the stadium for the early evening soccer game made it difficult to keep from getting separated from my friends. We bought general admission tickets from the scalpers outside the gate and made our way through the line into the stands.

The stadium was packed with 12,000 soccer fanatics sitting shoulder to shoulder on hard cement seats. My friends and I found a few open seats high enough to get a decent view of the field and settled in for the cross town rivalry game between the Oriente and Blooming teams.

Now a soccer game in Latin America is a bit more unruly than in the States. In fact, I have never

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experienced anything like it at any sporting event I have ever attended.

It was total chaos.

And I loved it.

I openly admit to being an adrenaline junky, the more jarring the better. This was a shot directly into the jugular.

The energy in the arena felt like it could explode at any minute. The local I went with told me he had attended three games which became full-scale riots. I could hardly wait. We agreed if a riot took place we would meet back at the truck, every man for himself. I began looking around the stands, figuring the best way out. I decided, in light of the tiny exits, it would likely be best to rush to the top of the stands as the fans dumped down onto the field. I had wisely worn a neutral color, your basic white t-shirt, so if rioting did break out I could join whatever side seemed to be winning at the moment.

Pulsating Latin music from speakers set up across the field drove the crowd into a frenzy before the game began. At one end of the field Oriente fans jumped up and down in rhythm to the throbbing, driving beat of the music. Blooming fans did the same. Folks set off Roman Candles, lighting up the crowd with a blinding white light. Fireworks exploded overhead and occasionally were directed at the players on the field. The smell of sulfur from the smoke bombs and fireworks clogged the already stifling evening air.

Around the perimeter of the playing field, police in full riot gear walked with muzzled German shepherds in tow. A high chain link fence separated the turf from the fans but did little to hinder the bottles being thrown at the players and referees. At one point, the game was

stopped because so many bottles were being thrown at the player in the corner of the field. It was complete mayhem.

And I loved it.

Time wore on, and the game remained scoreless as the crowd was continuing to work into a froth. Players fought on the field. Fans fought in the seats. A fight broke out about six feet from me between an Oriente fan and a misplaced Blooming fan who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The police came and hauled the Blooming fan away. The Police were either Oriente fans or exhibiting great wisdom as we were sitting in the Oriente section of the arena.

Finally, two thirds into the first half, Fabio Gimenez, number seven for Oriente, took a pass from a fellow team mate and bobbed and weaved toward the defending goalie. The crowd held its breath. The kick was solid and authoritative and blasted past the goalie into the goal.

Bedlam erupted.

A new round of fireworks exploded overhead as Oriente fans jumped to their feet and screamed their approval. More bottles were thrown onto the field. Anarchy ensued.

On the field, Fabio, in one sweeping motion, had peeled off his shirt and was now victoriously running the field, his arm outstretched in the glory of the moment. He screamed an unheard yell melding into the cheers erupting from the stands.

Then I saw it.

In black, block letters on his white undershirt, Fabio had written boldly the words, "JESUS SALVA TU VIDA"- Jesus Saves Your Life.

## OVER THE EDGE

I couldn't believe it. There, in the midst of all the chaos, Christ. There, at the moment of disorder and disarray, Christ shows up. Right there in the middle of it all, in blaring letters for all to see, with authority proclaiming, "I am the Christ of the Chaos".

Isn't that just like God? Right when it gets the craziest, when the pandemonium is pressing, when it feels like everything is out of control, Christ shows up.

We try so hard to keep ourselves from chaos. We try to organize and compartmentalize our lives so we can avoid the feeling of being out of control. Then it all breaks down, and we find ourselves falling headfirst into situations that are completely unmanageable and then wonder if we have what it takes to survive. We look for the exits, trying to figure the best way out of the problem. But all the while Christ is waiting to meet us in the middle of the crisis.

His glory shines the brightest when it is darkest in our lives.

When you come to the place where you are ready to give up, Christ is there. When you come to the place where you realize you don't have what it takes to make this life work, Christ is there. When your family is falling apart, Christ is there. When the bills are piling up, and you don't know what to do, Christ is there. When you get the call that your child is in trouble, Christ is there. He is always there, always willing to meet you in the middle of the chaos, always able to meet any need you may have. He longs for you to let go and let Him take care of your life.

The only question is, will you let Him.



## THE CHRIST OF THE CHAOS

Today, whatever is wearing you down, turn it over to Him. The chaos erupting in your life, leaving you frustrated, confused, and ready to quit, needs to be turned over to Him. He is waiting to meet you there, as the Christ of the chaos.

Jesus salva tu vida. Jesus saves your life.



## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

# PRESS ON

**T**he fall colors were vivid as the first rays of sun pierced the morning haze. I drove with the radio off, enjoying the silence. I was taking in all the beauty around me, keeping a keen eye on the lookout for any elk. Soon I turned off the pavement onto a sandy road and headed south into a wilderness area. Gradually the road narrowed, and the pine and birch trees closed in around me. Houses faded from view until I found myself alone, leisurely winding my way through the woods of northern Michigan.

Sunlight filtered through the yellowing leaves. The cool morning air was thick with moisture. A few wild turkeys wandered through a meadow on my left. Grouse skittered across the road and up a hill on the right. I poked along enjoying the view, the solitude, and the

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simple pleasure of being in the great outdoors on a crisp fall day.

My silence was disturbed when I came up over a hill and came upon a logging crew. In the clearing ahead sat two fully loaded logging trucks. Another full truck sat directly ahead of me completely blocking off access to the road. I stopped the car, hopped out and headed over to talk to one of the men.

An older man sauntered my way. He looked at my car, and seeing the low clearance warned that the road ahead had several sandy areas that were difficult to maneuver. With that admonition he turned and pulled himself up into the cab of his truck. With a groan and a burst of diesel smoke, the truck pulled out of view.

I walked back to my car and sat for a moment deciding what to do. The road had not been too bad, and the map showed the route ahead would provide prime opportunity for viewing the elk. I decided to press on.

The road quickly deteriorated. I had only driven half a mile when I met my first challenge. The ruts from the logging trucks became markedly deeper. My car's rear wheels spun in the loose sandy soil. I knew I had to keep the forward momentum going or I would bury the car in the sand. Finally, the car broke through onto firmer ground.

I stopped the car and with the engine still running tried to figure out what to do. The logging trucks were gone, and I was miles from the nearest paved road. If the road got any worse, I might not make it through. But I didn't have a choice. I could not go back because there was nowhere I could turn the car around. I decided to press on.

The chamber of commerce map showed a better road intersecting on my right another mile or two ahead. I had to make it to that road. I had to press on.

The road became worse.

I was no longer looking for elk, and I was not enjoying the beauty of the morning. I was not reflecting on the spectacular fall foliage. My concentration was solely on the next ten feet or so of the road before me. The car shook and fishtailed back and forth. I prayed and gave it more gas, but I could feel it slipping. Raw fear paralyzed my brain. I felt at any moment the car could get stuck in the wet, loose sand and mud. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. My head hurt. My stomach boiled. I thought I might throw up.

For what seemed like an eternity, I pressed on through the twisting, winding logging road. The car bottomed out on several occasions, but I pressed on. Mud splattered on the side windows, and I pressed on. Through trial after trial the car maintained its footing, and I pressed on. Finally, I came upon the side road I had been searching for, and I nearly cried. I was exhausted. The urge to throw up began to recede. I had made it through.

I meet people every week who are experiencing similar situations. The journey they are on often begins with such enthusiasm and optimism. Following Jesus Christ is going to be the great adventure and they say, "Won't it be grand!" Then the road gets crazy and they find themselves hanging on for dear life with no end to the trial in sight.

On those occasions, sometimes the only choice they have is to press on.

## OVER THE EDGE

I'm convinced that when you face adversity you have a choice to make. You can quit, give up, throw in the towel, and everyone would understand. Who could blame you with such difficulties before you?

Or you can choose to press on.

Great men through the ages are considered great, not because they succeeded, but because they did not quit. Winston Churchill, in the dark days of World War II, told his fellow Britons, "Never, never, never quit." Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, "this one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on." Did you catch that? He said, "straining toward what is ahead." Life is not a walk in the park, and sometimes it is going to be difficult. Life takes work, and we've got to press on until at last we break through to the other side.

I don't know the trials you may be facing today. It may be no one else around you knows what is going on in your life. Press on. You may feel ready to quit. Press on. The finances in your life may be out of control. Press on. Your relationships may be falling apart, and you are thinking about calling it quits. Press on. You may be in the middle of the mud, the wheels are slipping, and you're wondering if you are going to make it through. Press on.

I'm not telling you life's journey is going to be easy. I'm encouraging you in the journey. Stop in the midst of the trial, take a deep breath, say a prayer and press on.

I never saw any elk that morning, but I did learn one important truth: You can make it. Don't quit.

Press on.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

# THE WRITING ON THE WALL

**I**t was day five, I think. Or perhaps six or seven, I'm not really sure. The previous days blurred together since crossing the border from Italy and Slovenia into Croatia. Those days had been exciting times, meeting believers in Rijeka and Pula and partnering with them for evangelistic outreaches in the cities' squares. My role had been to draw a crowd by singing secular American Top Forty songs on a portable sound system. I was the freak show at the circus attempting to get people into the big tent. When a group of people would gather to see this strange spectacle, the evangelist would step up and present the gospel. After the presentation we would tear down the sound gear, load it up into the old ambulance serving as a bus, and head to the next area to do it all

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over again. It was a weird scene but a rewarding time as many came to know hope for the first time in their lives.

One afternoon we finished our presentation and hung out at a local church in the city of Pula to rest. Pula is an ancient city situated directly on the Mediterranean Sea, built by the Romans during the time of Christ. In fact, the city was originally called Paulo, and it is possible the Apostle Paul stopped here on one of his missionary journeys. Sections of the old Roman road we walked on wound past a Parthenon, sitting proudly like a Roman guard overlooking the harbor below. The Caesar himself would have spoken to the masses near where we spoke to the crowds. Stucco covered houses with clay tiled roofs crowded the busy city streets. And in the midst of it all, the church in Pula attempted to bring light into an otherwise darkened city.

I explored my way to the sanctuary of the church, enjoyed the silence, and was thankful for a moment to rest and gather my thoughts.

I slumped into a pew, running my hand across the wood smoothed by countless hands before, and my eyes fell on the writing on the wall behind the pulpit. The Croatian alphabet uses a Slavic lettering system which is confusing to me. I had only spent a week in the country but had made friends with a Croatian kid named Zlotko who became my language instructor. I had learned a great deal from him in a short amount of time. I would practice pronouncing words by reading aloud street signs and billboards as I walked through the cities. Even though most of the time I didn't know what the words were that I was saying, my pronunciation was getting better by the day.



As I sat in the empty church building and stared at the writing on the wall, I began to pronounce the words aloud, thinking maybe they would begin to make sense. The message was about God, but what? Another word said something about man. "Krist Isus." That was an easy one - "Jesus Christ." I chalked that one down and moved on to the next.

Little by little, the words of a familiar verse began to take shape on the wall.

"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus". (I Timothy 2:5)

I was elated that I was able to interpret the words on the wall.

I felt humbled when I realized what it said.

It occurred to me that the soul has no nationality. There aren't Asian souls, Croatian souls, or American souls. There are only human souls. Period.

Just as there is only one kind of soul, there is only one God who can meet the needs in our lives. There is only one mediator between us and God - the God-man, Jesus Christ.

What struck me that day was the common need of the human heart and the unique solution to its emptiness. One God, one mediator, one need we all have. It doesn't matter what continent you live on, what language you speak, or what tone the color of your skin is. It is of no consequence if you earn millions or live in poverty. It makes no difference the color or shape of your eyes. In the end, our hearts all have the same need.

I saw the emptiness in the eyes of the Croatian people as we stood on the streets and shared Christ with them. I've witnessed the same hollow look on the faces of

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individuals the world over. It reminded me of the same hopelessness I've seen in the eyes of folks who have attended my concerts in the United States.

But I've also seen the look of wonder when a person realizes in his heart of hearts that there is, in fact, hope. There is a God who loves him and gave His son so he could have a relationship with Him. I've understood the universal language of a tear streaming down a woman's face as she realizes for the first time that God loves her and has made a way for her to have a personal relationship with Him, a relationship meeting her every need.

In one small moment, in a quiet church sanctuary half a world away from my home, a truth older than the Roman Empire found its way into a heart two centuries removed. There is only one God. And there is only one way for any of us to get to Him, through the person of Jesus Christ.

I guess you could say I saw the writing on the wall. And though the writing is often hard to understand, its meaning is remarkably unchanged.

One God, one need, one Way. One amazing name to share with a world waiting to hear.

The man, Krist Isus.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

# UNGUARDED

I woke from a deep sleep and shifted my position on the pillow. The fan in the open window sucked in the cool, dry air of the Michigan fall night. It was perfect weather for some serious sleeping. A glance at the clock revealed it was way too early to get up, the red numbers on the digital clock glaring back, 1:47 a.m. I closed my puffy eyes and began to slip back to sleep. And then I heard it.

Someone outside my bedroom window whispered my name.

I froze, suddenly very alert and very awake. Was my mind playing tricks on me? Surely I must have imagined it.

And then I heard it again. Long and drawn out in an icy cold whisper, someone was speaking my name.

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My headboard was on the same wall as the window so I couldn't see the source of the voice. I opened my eyes just a slit and could see a flashlight beam working its way around the room. Again I heard the voice whisper my name.

My mind was a blur of thoughts, all shouting and crashing into each other. My heart was pounding. I lay perfectly still in bed. In my mind, I figured it was someone I knew playing a really sick joke on me.

After a while the voice got louder. Every couple of minutes or so he would say my name again, each time louder than the last until finally he was speaking in a normal voice, as if trying to wake me up. In that sickening moment I realized it was not the voice of anyone I knew.

I waited. Then I waited some more. After a time I didn't hear any more from the window, and I sat up in bed and nervously looked around the room. Through the open doorway of my bedroom I could see a flashlight beam moving around the living room, and I figured whoever the intruder was, he was shining the light through the front windows of the house.

Then, in one terrifying moment, a figure of a man stepped into my bedroom door.

I could not believe what I was seeing. In a rush of emotions, ranging from fear to rage, I yelled at the guy, "Hey! What are you doing in my house?" He froze.

My mind was reeling as I hurriedly turned on a light. As I tried to figure out what he was doing in my house, I got into a conversation with the guy. Over and over, in utter disbelief, I said, "I can not believe this. What are you doing in my house?" I could not comprehend what

was happening. At last I realized the insanity of carrying on a dialogue with a total stranger who had just broken my house, and I said, "Forget it! I'm calling the police." I reached for the phone on the stand beside my bed. As I did, he stepped toward me. "Back off!" I shouted angrily. I was mad, confused, and felt violated all at the same time. The intruder must have understood that the lovely chat was over, and he ran out the front of my house. I was close behind on the portable phone with the 911 officer still on the line. My uninvited guest jumped into his car, started the engine, and tore off down the road. It was the thick of night, and it was impossible to get a license plate number or clear description of the car. With my heart still pounding, I returned to the house.

I would love to go into great detail and tell you the other strange things that happened in the ordeal, but I just don't have room in this chapter. I did learn one valuable lesson: In life, you have to play it smart. I had made some classic mistakes which had lead up to the event. First of all, I hadn't bothered to lock the house before I went to bed. Both the front door and the back door were open. I had made it easy for him to break in. Stupid? Yes. But I would wager most of us live our lives in a similar fashion every day.

I'm referring to the way we leave the door to our hearts unlocked. I wonder sometimes why I stumble and fall into temptation. But a quick examination reveals I have left the door wide open for Satan to sneak in. And usually he does so quietly, whispering my name, creeping in and taking advantage of the opportunity to steal my love away from God. How do I leave the door to my

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heart open? By neglecting the relationship I have with God.

If I believe I can enjoy a quality relationship with God in ten minutes a day with Him, I am kidding myself. And so are you if that is the pattern in your life. Sometimes, I barely take time in the morning to speak His name before rushing into the list of things I need to take care of during the day. God never intends for it to be that way. He longs for you and me to be in a relationship with Him that is real and personal, something we come back to over and over throughout the day. I don't just have devotions in the morning. I live in devotion to a person, Jesus Christ. It is not an event. It is a relationship. When I neglect the relationship, it is as if I have left the doors wide open for Satan to get in.

I will probably never know the identity of the man who broke into my house. The police ran a check on the name he gave me, but nothing showed up in their files. You may be wondering how he knew my name. There are several possible explanations. I am a public figure, and it is plausible he was stalking me. Most likely he got my name and house number from the phone book, showed up to rob the place, and was surprised to find someone at home. Either way, one thing is sure: I learned a valuable lesson that night. Before I go to bed, I lock the doors to my house.

Join me, will you? Play it smart.

Guard your heart.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

# UNGUARDED AGAIN

I closed the lid on the box, brushed off my hands on my jeans, and pushed the empty container up against the wall. Another one completed but still a stack of boxes waiting for my attention in the garage. I sat down on the edge of my bed and reflected on the hectic pace of the past three weeks.

I had recently moved from Michigan to Florida with a mission trip to Croatia sandwiched between. It had been a blur of activity. Two days after arriving home from Europe, I turned the key in the ignition of the moving truck and made my way south to warmer climes. It was now a few days into the unpacking part of the adventure and it was already getting old.

I was tired, and I flopped down unto my bed. The sun had long since set on this coastal community, and I was ready for some well deserved rest.

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Days before I left for Croatia, I had endured the terror of being broken into while I slept. That experience left me feeling violated and fearful. I was glad to move away from the home in Michigan with its creepy memories of that night. There were lingering concerns of the possibility of being stalked. But the image of the face of the man I confronted in my bedroom doorway was beginning to fade, washing away ever so slowly like the washing of the sand on the beach in the town where I now lived.

I was almost asleep when I rolled over and happened to glance toward the master bedroom bathroom. I could see out the bathroom window to the eaves of the house outside, lit up by the backyard light. I thought it was strange that I could see out the window. I remembered it was one of those privacy windows with a film on it so you can't see in or out. The longer I looked at it the more curious I got. Without turning on a light, I got out of bed and walked over to the bathroom in the dark to see what was going on.

Not turning on the light was my first mistake.

As I stepped toward the bathroom door, a man stepped out at me.

I shouted and threw my hands up to protect myself as I dove to the right, my shoulder crashing against the wall. I collapsed into a heap on the carpet, cradled my head in my hands, and nearly cried.

I had stepped into a full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door.

If I had not been so terrified I would have laughed out loud. The memory of the previous break-in was just too fresh, and it was all I could do to keep myself from



losing it. I sat down on the edge of the bed, turned the light on, and tried to gather my composure.

Dazed and still shaking, I looked around the room to try and comprehend how this had happened. The back of the bathroom door had a full length mirror attached to it. When the door was closed the mirror perfectly reflected a window on the bedroom wall adjacent to it. While I was lying in bed in the dark, it appeared I was looking out the bathroom window when, in fact, I was looking at a reflection of one of the windows in my room. Since I hadn't put any window treatment up yet, the window was open to the outside. When I walked across the room in the dark and stepped toward the bathroom door, I saw my own reflection stepping back at me.

If only I had turned on the light.

Sadly enough, that is the problem most of us have. We don't turn on the light. No, I'm not talking about light fixtures in our homes. I'm talking about something much more important.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) Yet most of us choose instead to try to make our own way through this world. We wander around in darkness, never thinking to turn on His light in our circumstances. Somehow, we believe we can make it on our own. So we try, and we fail, and we stumble along when we could just as easily turn on a light and clearly find the way. And how do we turn on the light? By following Him.

Ironic, isn't it, that if we would only turn on the light we would find most of the fears we face aren't even real. Just like the figure of the man stepping towards me

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vanished when I turned on the light in my bedroom, the way we view our lives and circumstances will change when we shine the light of Jesus into our situation. He shines hope into our hopelessness, His love into our loneliness, His truth into our deceptive world. He longs to shine His light into our lives, leading us into abundant living. The life He wants to give to you and to me is a life where we see clearly what is truly important.

How about you? Are you tired of trying to find your own way? Have you had enough of the emptiness accompanying that road? Are you bruised and beaten from bumping into things in the dark? Give it up. There's reason enough to surrender your life to the Light of the World. He longs to lead you into a life full of blessing. Won't you follow Him today?

Come on, turn on the light.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

# THE TALE OF THE TIDE

It was a delicious, warm and sunny afternoon, and the beach was perfect for a mini-vacation. I planted my lounge chair at just the precise angle to the sun, peeled off my shirt and threw my towel over the slatted seat of the recliner. When I kicked off my sandals, I discovered the coarse sand was blistering hot. I quickly settled into a horizontal position, my feet dangling off the end of the chair, safely above the hot granules of shell and sand. It was one of those afternoons made for getting away from the office, leaving behind the e-mails, the fax machine, and the ringing phone for a few moments of solitude and silence.

Now the beach was far from quiet, but it was noise of a different kind. The cry of seagulls mixed with the ocean waves breathing in and out as if sighing in a deep slumber. A balmy breeze carried with it the scent of salt.

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Water cascaded over the sea shells and sand in an endless hushing. I was marinating in coconut oil as the sun warmed me far beneath the skin. My eyes were closed and my breathing was getting slower by the minute. It was Shangri-La. Paradise found. Bali Hai.

It was Bali-good-bye.

At just the precise moment I began to slip into a peaceful slumber, I felt an icy-cold rush of salt water cascading over my bare feet. Pandemonium broke out. Sand crabs ran for cover. One foot got stuck between the slats in the seat. As I half sat, half stood on the lounge chair trying to get away from the cold water, the edges of my beach towel were dripping wet, and I watched my cooler floating out toward the sand bar.

I had become a victim of an incoming tide.

Spend enough time at the beach, park your chair just a little too close to the water line, and sooner or later it will get you. It is persistent in its pursuit. It is as old as the earth itself. It is a never-ending, ageless effort which cannot be held back by anything man may put in its way. It always wins.

God's love is like the incoming tide. He is relentless in His pursuit of you and me. He is in a constant quest for our adoration. Like the endless cycle of the motion of the ocean, He reaches closer and closer until at last we are compelled to surrender to His loving embrace. He desires more than anything to cover us with His grace and mercy, to give us the hope to live daily in His care.

But unlike the sneak attack at the beach, God's love over taking our lives is the best thing that could ever happen to us. It renews us. It gives us the strength we need to face the difficulties we find in "life." Without it,

we would not have what it takes to make it on our own. We need His love to wash over us, to cleanse us from sin, and to change us at the heart level. For once and for all. Forever.

Have you ever become a recipient of the incoming tide of God's love? Has there ever been a time when you surrendered to the love He has already freely given you. God never intended us to live apart from His love. That's why so many people struggle from day to day, trying to make it on their own, trying to find meaning in this crazy mixed up world.

God never meant for us to make it on our own. From the beginning of time, He began writing His love in creation. He then signed His name at the bottom of the page when He gave His only Son to die in our place. It was the ultimate expression of His love. You and I were separated from God by the sin in our lives. But because Jesus was willing to die in our place, you and I can have a relationship with God that is real and personal. That is amazing.

God's love can be described in many ways. I like to think of it as unrelenting. It pursues me without end. I can not escape it no matter how hard I try. It is unavoidable. It is undeniable. And best of all, it is available to any one who will receive it.

I've gone back to the beach countless times. The weather changes, the shoreline changes, even the temperature of the water changes. I've seen the wind whip the surface of the water to a boil and have seen the same water with a mirror finish in an early morning light. But one thing that has never changed is the truth of the tide. It has been there before I ever walked this earth and

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will be there long after I am gone. It is relentless, ageless, and ceaseless. It simply is. And if you hang out there long enough, it will get you.

My suggestion? Surrender to the tide of God's love today.

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

# PRACTICE THE POSITION

“**B**race! Brace! Brace!” the pilot shouted over the intercom as the plane descended the final feet to the tarmac below. Hurriedly, I put one hand on the back of the seat in front of me, placed the other hand on top of the first, and then braced my forehead on the back of that hand. A small baby, held closely to her mother’s breast, sensed the tension in the air and cried out as her mother attempted to brace herself.

It was a clear morning in Nashville, Tennessee, as we boarded a plane headed for Albany, New York. After the routine safety speech, we buckled ourselves in and sped down the runway for take off. As soon as we lifted off the ground, a loud banging noise began to reverberate throughout the cabin. Something was seriously wrong. Instead of lifting into the sky, the plane slowed and began

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to descend. But we were not headed toward the airport. I looked at the man sitting next to me and stated the obvious: “We are going down.”

An eerie silence settled over the passengers as the realization spread that something dreadful was happening. The banging from the right, rear landing gear continued to echo through our cabin.

The stewardess stood at the front of the plane in the aisle holding a large black notebook with one hand and a microphone in the other. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, “I need 100% of your attention. I am about to make an important announcement, and I need to have your undivided attention. We have a problem with the landing gear. The plane is returning to Nashville and will have to make an emergency landing.” At this point, she certainly had our undivided attention.

“Everyone put their tray table in the upright position and tighten your seatbelt,” she continued. We complied. “Are there any other flight attendants, military personnel, or police officers on board this plane?” A man in the back raised his hand. “Thank you. I will need your assistance.”

For the next 30 minutes we rehearsed every detail of what we would be required to do.

Each passenger had to practice the position... the position we would place ourselves in at the moment of the emergency landing. “Place one hand on the seat in front of you. Place the other hand on top of that hand. Then place your forehead on the back of your hands.” She demonstrated the position, and then told each of us to practice it. She walked slowly down the aisle making sure each person in each row was executing the position



correctly. It was crucial each of us knew the position. It was a position of great security.

Now, what I failed to tell you earlier is I am an adrenaline junkie. I love exciting events. On top of the fact that I was preparing for an emergency landing, I was also in prime real estate for an adrenaline fix – I was in the window seat exit row!

The stewardess came back to our row and began to explain how each of us would help her during the landing. I became assistant number one. My first responsibility was to check for smoke or flames outside my window. If it was clear, I was then to remove the emergency exit door, throw it outside the plane, crawl out on the wing, and then assist the other passengers out the plane. The guy sitting next to me became assistant number two. His role was to follow me out the emergency exit, run fifty yards from the plane, turn back to the plane and begin calling to the other passengers, “Come to me, come to me.” In this way we would be able to gather the passengers together to account for everyone.

By now the banging from the wheel well had stopped, and we all sat quietly in our seats, pondering what lay before us.

The plane banked and made the turn back toward the airport. The pilot came over the speaker and announced we would make a low, slow approach to the airport. We would do a fly by of the control tower so they could assess the landing gear. When we flew over the airport, the airport looked like a ghost town. There were no airplanes on the airstrip. Any plane waiting to land had been placed into a holding pattern. Four fire trucks, with

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lights flashing, waited on the tarmac, spaced at intervals along the runway. We neared the ground and passed the control tower. The pilot then brought the plane back up in the air. In the crisis of the moment, it seemed like a long time passed before the plane finally made a slow turn back toward the airport.

One minute from landing the pilot shouted over the intercom, “Brace! Brace! Brace!” and we immediately assumed the position we had practiced earlier. Slowly the plane descended out of the morning sky. Tension filled the air. Bit by bit the plane drew closer to touchdown. Ever so carefully, the plane settled on the asphalt.

Suddenly, I felt the plane begin to fall over on the right side, the side of the faulty landing gear. For one quick moment I thought it was going to be bad. But then...nothing. The pilot gradually applied the brakes, and the plane came to a stop. The landing gear had held.

I later found out that what felt like the landing gear collapsing was actually the plane settling down on the faulty landing gear – the pilot had landed the plane on the other two wheels.

Applause spontaneously erupted from the passengers. As excited as I was to land safely, I have to admit I was a bit disappointed I didn’t get to exit the plane via the wing. I’m quite sure the other passengers did not share my frustration.

Looking back on the experience reminds me of an area of my spiritual life I often take for granted: practicing the position. In the procedures for an emergency landing, it was critical each of us understood how to do the crash position. It was so important, each of us had to practice the position. In life, the crash

position looks something like this: find your favorite seat in your house and kneel down in front of it. Now place one hand on the seat in front of you. Place the other hand on top of that, and then place your forehead on top of your hands. You are now in the most secure position in the world – the position of prayer.

But the key to the position is not in its simplicity, it is in the practicing of it. You practice the position when times are good so when the chaos comes, and it will, you already know how to do it. Don't wait until circumstances drive you to your knees. Instead, practice that position daily, learning to have conversations with God about the everyday details in your life. Then you will find, when the challenges come, you will know exactly what to do.

Practice the position.



## CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

# THE HAND OF GOD

**I**n the distance I heard sirens from the approaching ambulance. I stood in the midst of a sea of broken glass and car parts strewn across the pavement. I reached in through the smashed out window, careful not to cut my arm on the shards of glass. Holding onto her hand, I looked into the face of an older woman who sat stunned from the impact of a semi which had just broadsided her.

It began as an ordinary summer day in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. I was going to lunch with a friend and had just gotten out of my car at a restaurant. As I walked toward the building, a loud crashing sound startled me and stopped me in my tracks. I turned in time to see a car flying through the air, smashing down into the opposite lane. I could not believe what I was seeing. My friend looked at me and said he would call 911. I have had basic

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first aid training, so I said I would run over and see if there was anything I could do.

When I got to the car, I was grateful to see the woman didn't appear to be bleeding. She was certainly hurting though. I began asking her questions, trying to evaluate her condition. She had a great deal of pain in her leg, and she was pinned in the seat. She sat there unmoving, with fear spreading across her face.

I felt helpless to do anything for her. The reality was, I could do nothing to meet the physical need she had. I knew better than to move her, or I would risk doing more harm than good. It would eventually require the Jaws of Life to remove her from the vehicle. There was really nothing else I could do. I stood there in an awkward silence, trying to think of something to say, and finally blurted out, "Would you mind if I prayed for you?" Her face, contorted with pain, relaxed a bit as she looked at me and said, "I would love that."

There, in the middle of the mess, I reached in and gently put a hand on her knee. I stood there and began to pray out loud for her. Now this was not some fancy "Our Father who art in heaven..." kind of prayer. No, I just prayed for anything that came to mind. I prayed she would have a sense of calm. I prayed the emergency personnel would get there quickly. I prayed that God would give her a clear awareness of His presence. I just prayed.

I could hear the sirens approaching, so I stopped praying. I said to her, "Can you hear the sirens? The medical personnel are almost here. You've just got to hang on a little longer, alright?" She nodded her head.

Finally, the emergency team arrived, and one of the fireman stepped beside me at the window. I stepped back and walked away.

Later that afternoon I got a call from the lady's husband. He told me she was doing well, in spite of having a broken pelvis and a broken neck. She was headed for surgery, but it appeared everything was going to be okay. I was certainly relieved and grateful to get an update. Then he said to me, "You will never know what it meant to my wife when you prayed for her. When she had the accident the only thing she could think was "I just wish someone would pray for me." I was very surprised. I hadn't done anything to take care of her physically, but the one thing she needed was the one thing God had prompted me to do. I had prayed for her.

I believe I had a divine appointment that day all the way from Nashville, Tennessee, to Scottsbluff, Nebraska. My job at that time was to pray for someone who was in a crisis in her life. And I got the incredible privilege of being the hand of God because I was willing to step out of my comfort zone and step into someone else's chaos. I couldn't do anything for her physical need. But God knew at 11:48 AM she was going to need someone to pray for her, and he chose me to be the one. What a privilege!

You and I both know folks whose lives, for whatever reason, are a wreck. And it may be you are unable to meet the core need in their lives. But it may be enough for you to just go to them and say "Can I pray for you?" You might have the privilege of being the hand of God in their life. Often you will have to step out of your comfort zone and step into someone else's chaos. But when you

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do, you will find this incredible privilege of God using you in someone else's life.

It doesn't take a seminary degree for God to use you. God is looking for folks who will be willing to let Him work through them. He only needs you to be available. You don't actually meet the needs. It is God who meets the needs through you. That is an amazing thought.

I wonder how many times we miss the great privilege of being used by God because we are either too busy to get involved, or we just don't want to get our hands dirty. I wonder how many folks just need to know someone cares. They don't expect us to meet their needs; they just want someone to be there for them in the midst of their crisis, to know someone is praying for them.

How about you? Know anyone whose life is a wreck? Maybe you could be the hand of God to reach into their lives. Get out of your comfort zone, step into the chaos, and see what God can do through your life today.

Are those sirens I'm hearing in the distance?



## CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

# SALTY LIVING

I sprawled on the floor of the locker room, wincing in pain, and trying to extend my legs. The pain intensified and spread from my hips to my feet. My toes twisted and curled under. I held my breath, gritted my teeth, and tried to figure out what to do.

It had been a hot day in middle Tennessee. Working outdoors on a project, I had been careful to stay hydrated, drinking plenty of cool water throughout the day. It was 96 degrees, but it didn't seem too bad at the time. I hadn't eaten much of anything all day because I was focused instead on finishing the project. I wanted to get a workout in at the gym before it closed for the day. I finally finished the project late in the afternoon. Tired as I was, I was still looking forward to the workout ahead.

At the gym, everything seemed fine. The workout for the day included a lot of leg work, and by the time I

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finished I was completely exhausted. Because of the work at home and the workout at the gym, I could hardly walk. I was patting myself on the back for a job well done as I shuffled my way to the shower room.

Then I felt the first twinge in my legs. I could feel the muscles begin to tighten, and I tried to stretch to alleviate the discomfort. Very quickly I realized something was terribly wrong.

The cramps started in my hip sockets. Suddenly, the cramps locked up both the front and back of my legs. Pain seared through my body. My calves seized. I could no longer stand and awkwardly lowered myself to the floor. I was dumbfounded. I didn't know what to do. I could not even put on my shoes. I just kept holding my breath and trying to stretch out my legs to little avail. In my whole life, I don't know if I have ever experienced greater pain.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered reading an article about salt depletion and its effect on the body. I knew I had drunk plenty of water throughout the day but began to question if I had eaten any food that had salt in it. I could not think of any. I couldn't stand up all the way, but in desperation I stumbled barefoot to the employee lounge. I poured salt into the palm of my hand and began to eat the salt, washing it down with a glass of water.

I had become a victim of severe heat cramps, a dangerous condition in which the body's store of salt becomes exhausted. Salt, sodium chloride, is a key element in the body's ability to communicate at the cellular level. Unlike other chemicals the body requires, salt cannot be reproduced by the body. Salt is needed by

the human body in order to help muscles and nerves work together and to regulate blood pressure. When the body is salt depleted, muscle cells begin to contract indiscriminately, and the result is massive pain. Deprive the body of salt long enough and a painful death can be the result.

No salt equals great pain.

I find it really interesting that the Bible talks about salt depletion as well. In Matthew 5:13 Jesus said "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."

Our world is severely salt depleted today. Most folks don't know why they experience pain, but they do know something is missing in their lives. There are wars around the world and fighting in our homes. Folks have pursued wealth and possessions only to find it does not satisfy. What they are really looking for is salt. They are looking for the one thing that can make a difference in their lives. The question is, will they find it through you?

God says you and I are the salt of the earth. Our world today desperately needs the love of God lived out through our lives. Your cooperation is critical. It is essential that you are permeating your world; otherwise, people will experience unnecessary pain. I wonder how much of the pain and suffering we witness in our world today is a result of this simple truth.

I also find it intriguing that Christ says if the salt has lost its saltiness it is pretty much worthless. This begs me to ask the question, "Have we lost our saltiness?" To be blunt, is our Christianity "no longer good for anything"? We seem to have lost most of the characteristics

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identifying us as followers of Christ. Things like loving God with all our hearts. Things like loving others like we love ourselves. Many folks who call themselves Christians live their lives no differently from the rest of the world. There is no saltiness in them. There is no impact on the world around them. They may be good, moral, religious people, but basically they have no real relationship with God. As a result, they have no real influence in the world around them. How sad when God intended so much more; even sadder for the lives of those who suffer as a result.

It was several hours later that day before I was able to walk normally again. I realized I had made some simple mistakes. In my effort to stay hydrated, I had in effect washed the salt right out of my body. Combined with salt lost through sweating, the result was a world of hurt.

Join me today in making a difference in our world. The world needs you. Someone in your sphere of influence needs to see the love of God lived out through your life today. Get out there and permeate your world. Begin today.

Remember, you are the salt of the earth.

## CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

# BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU PARK IT

I had been gone for a week visiting friends in southwest Florida, and the flight back to the Nashville International Airport had been uneventful. I boarded the shuttle to the parking lot. I looked forward to the drive home and the comforts of a familiar space. To save money, I park in the economy lot. The few extra minutes it takes to wait for the shuttle bus is inconsequential to me. Being a creature of habit, I usually park in section four where it is easy to get a parking spot close to the pick up cabana.

Recently, however, I discovered a unique spot hidden in section six. I stumbled on this spot one day while exiting the parking lot through a route I don't normally drive. What makes this spot special is there is a large tree on the edge of the lot giving a great deal of shade to

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several spaces. The rest of the parking lot broils in the heat of the Tennessee sun. When I had left for the trip a week before, I had snagged one of the premium spots, congratulating myself on my prowess in finding it. I was pleased to be able to save the interior of my car from damaging rays and the oven-like temperatures they generate.

The shuttle bus rounded the corner of my section of the parking lot, and I scanned the sea of cars for my ride. There in the shade of the old tree sat my car. As I exited the bus and began to drag my luggage over to the car, something struck me as odd. The car was sparkling clean when I left it a week ago. But something seemed amiss with the paint. As I drew closer, I was shocked to see what had happened to my car.

It was covered in bird poop. That's right. I said it. Poop.

Now I am not saying there were a few bird droppings on the car. No, from front to back, top to bottom, the car was literally covered with bird poop. Being a numbers guy, I actually began to count the droppings, figuring there had to be some sort of *Guinness Book of World Records* event happening here. I quit counting at 60.

What I thought had been a brilliant move a week ago was now coming back to haunt me. It was apparently nesting season. I'm guessing some bird found the tree as alluring as I had and either set up home there or was using it as an out house. Either way, the evidence was condemning. I had picked the single worst spot in the parking lot for my car.

As I pulled up to the pay station to exit the parking lot, I could hardly see out my windshield. I was afraid to

turn on the wipers for fear I would whitewash the entire glass. Even the side windows had runs down them.

I learned a hard lesson that day but one that has continued to stick with me: Be careful where you park it.

Now, sure, this applies to parking lots everywhere. But I also think it clearly applies to the way I live my life. I am called to a life of purity and holiness. But if I am not careful where I park it, I can find myself in a real mess.

I'm talking about the time I park it in front of the TV. Or the time I park it in front of the computer screen. Or maybe the time I park it at a movie theater. You have to be careful where you park it.

You do realize that God calls us, as followers of Christ, to be holy. In the Old Testament, when God was giving the Law to Moses, He said "Be holy for I am holy." (Leviticus 11:44, 45). In the New Testament Peter repeated this call to holiness. (1 Peter 1:16) And in Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people." (Ephesians 5:3) Did you catch that? He said "not even a hint...of any kind of impurity."

I would rather not hold up my life to that kind of scrutiny. If you are like me, at one time or another you have probably said something like this: "Oh, that \_\_\_\_\_ was not that bad (insert movie, television show, website, etc.). But in God's economy, not that bad is not that good. In fact, he just calls it sin. Unholy. Unrighteous. It's poop. Yes, I said it again. One small indiscretion here, another small compromise there, and the next thing you know, you are covered in it. What seems small at the time can add up to a huge mess.

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Since the fateful day in the parking lot, I have been giving greater scrutiny to what I watch on TV. I'm finding there is really not a lot I can watch and still claim to be holy. As I work my way through the day, I am finding the call to holiness echoing through my mind. In the smallest of details, I am holding up the light of God's holiness to my life and finding plenty of areas where I need to change.

Right now, the Holy Spirit is likely bringing to your mind an area in your life you need to surrender to holiness. You may have said, as I have, "It's not that bad." But in your heart, you know God is calling you to raise the bar, to live your life without even a hint of any kind of impurity. I encourage you to pause and take a moment to confess it to God and ask for His help in moving forward to live the life of holiness He intended you to live.

After arriving home from the trip, I washed the car and even put a fresh coat of wax on the paint. It felt good to see it clean again. I learned a lesson that day far more important than where to park a car. I learned that even the small impurities have big consequences when it comes to living the life God intended me live. Won't you join me today?

Be careful where you park it.



## CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

# GEORGE IN THE JUNGLE

**I**n the distance, a Green Toucan called out to its mate.

The rain forest closed in around us as we peered down at the forest floor 180 feet below. I stood nervously perched on a wood slat platform, high in the jungle canopy in the rain forest of El Valle de Anton, Panama. Around me stood massive trees that had been slowly growing since the time Columbus discovered America. I could see a steel cable stretched between the tree tops until it faded away as it parted the branches of the trees before me. The cable, only  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches in diameter, would carry my weight to the next platform attached to a tree somewhere in the hidden distance. I tightened the strap around my waist and clipped the attached roller assembly to the cable. I leaned back into the harness and tentatively rested my weight on the narrow wire.

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Our guide, Danilo, spoke no English, and I spoke little Spanish. His instructions were basic, and I understood them more through his example than his words.

“Siempre! Siempre!” he said.

One word I could actually understand. “Always!” Always keep your hand behind the roller assembly. I could only imagine what damage I would do if I broke the rule. Images of sliced off fingers lingered in my mind.

I paused for a moment, considering the magnitude of what I was doing. In a few seconds I would push off from the safety of the platform to glide through the tree tops, hanging from a wire cable almost 200 feet above the forest floor. Beneath my stand the waters of El Chorro Macho, a deceptively beautiful waterfall, cascaded over moss covered volcanic rock to a crystal clear pool below. If I fell from the line I would drop some 200 feet to the boulders below.

And then I felt my feet leave the stand.

In a moment I was sailing through the cool moist air of the jungle canopy like a modern day Peter Pan flying through Never Never Land. My momentum quickly increased, and I felt myself pulling back on the wire with my gloved hand to slow myself down. My pulse quickened, and adrenaline pumped into my blood stream. I watched the tree tops pass by me like the slow-motion opening of some epic motion picture. A few moments later, my feet connected with the wood stand on the other end of the line. I had safely arrived at a rickety platform high in another mammoth tree.

An expectant grin crossed my face as I looked at the line of cables stretched from tree to tree across the jungle. This was going to be a day I would not soon forget.

I have been accused of being reckless. I prefer to use the word trusting. Maybe trusting to the point of being foolish, but trusting none the less. I trusted the wire to hold my weight and to carry me safely to the other side. I had only one reason for this trust: I had just seen the guide go before me. Even though I could not see where he ended the ride, I hadn't heard any screaming or the sound of tree branches breaking so I assumed he had arrived safely.

Trusting is not something I do naturally. To place confidence in someone or something other than my own resources goes against the grain to me. I prefer to take care of myself, to manage my life on my own. I would rather know where this crazy ride is going to end.

The problem is, when I try to do it myself, life is very unmanageable. No matter how hard I try to fix my problems I am incapable of doing anything to control the chaos.

Life is not unlike that ride between the trees. At some point we reach a place where we have to put our trust in someone other than ourselves. We cannot see the end from our vantage point. We are helpless in our own strength to carry ourselves across to the other side.

Here is where it is important to understand a critical point: We do not place our trust in just anything or anybody. It is not a blind or foolish trust. We place our trust in a guide who has gone before us, who knows the end from the beginning. We put our confidence in

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someone who understands our weaknesses, our fears, and our shortcomings. We place our trust in a person.

That person is Jesus Christ.

Not only is Jesus our guide in this life, but He is the only way to cross the chasm from this earth to Heaven when we die. Being good is admirable but will not save you. Being religious may bring some satisfaction to your life but will not save you. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the only one who can. We have a problem, and the problem is called sin. Because we do things that are wrong, we are separated from God who is holy and cannot look at sin. The Bible says that because we are full of sin we must die, which is the penalty for our sinful condition.

But the good news is that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sins when He died in our place on the cross. It is as if the cross stretched across the gap between us and God like the cable between the trees in the forest. When we place our trust in Jesus Christ, and accept His sacrifice on our behalf, we can know the peace and the joy and the contentment we are searching for in this life. And then one day we will make it safely to the other side, to eternal life. His death bridged the gap.

Some of you right now are standing on the edge of the platform looking down at the rocks and the water far below. You may have been religious for years and have done many good things, but you have never put your trust in the person of Jesus Christ. You may have hid this fact from those around you, but in your heart you know you are missing something in your life. You have tried everything imaginable to fill the void inside, but nothing has worked for you. On the other side of the divide is a

life abundant and full. It is time to put your trust in Jesus to carry you to the other side. Will you do it today?

If you find yourself in this position I would like to invite you to join me in the greatest adventure of all - beginning a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Right now, in your own words, admit to God you have sinned. Ask Him to forgive you of your sins. Tell Him you are placing your trust in Jesus Christ and accepting His payment on your behalf. And God will save you.

This truly is the adventure of a lifetime. May this be the day you begin to live your life, one step over the edge.



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