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# MAX LUCADO

# IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

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In the eye of the storm : a day in the life of Jesus / Max Lucado.

To Robert and Elsie Forcum

two ambassadors with a love for the church

and a burden for the world

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**Before You Begin …**

Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when "sssopp!" Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie—still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do … she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied,

"Chippie doesn't sing much anymore—he just sits and stares." It's hard not to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over … that's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart.

Can you relate to Chippie? Most of us can. One minute you're seated in familiar territory with a song on your lips, then … The pink slip comes. The rejection letter arrives. The doctor calls. The divorce papers are delivered. The check bounces. A policeman knocks on your door.

Sssopp! You're sucked into a black cavern of doubts, doused with the cold water of reality, and stung with the hot air of empty promises.

The life that had been so calm is now so stormy. You're hailstormed by demands.

Assailed by doubts. Pummeled by questions. And somewhere in the trauma, you lose your joy. Somewhere in the storm, you lose your song.

Ever found yourself in a storm of life? If so, if Chippie's story is your story, then I'm glad you picked up this book. I wrote it with you in mind. I wrote it because there is a day in the life of Christ that you need to know about.

Aside from the Crucifixion, it is the most stressful day of his life. A roaring sequence of bad news, demanding crowds, and doubting friends. Twenty-four hours in which Jesus faces the same gale-force fears that you and I face. Waves of pressure slam. Winds of anxiety blow. Clouds of darkness billow.

Yet through it all Jesus remains calm. He endures the day without losing his song. I'd like to help you see how he did it.

First we'll consider the *stress of demands.* Jesus handled twelve hours of chaos. What did he do to keep his cool? What did he know that gave him strength? If your days are bookended with deadlines and "chuck-it-all" frustrations—then you'll like this section.

The second section is entitled *Storms of Doubt.* Have you ever found yourself in a storm and wondered why Jesus doesn't pull you out? The disciples did. While Jesus went up the mountain, they went out on the sea. The storm came, their boat bounced, and they were left with a long night of fear and a long list of questions. "Jesus knows we're in a storm. Why doesn't he come?"

Sound familiar?

The final section of the book deals with a third source of anxiety—the *sting of failure*.

In the twilight hours of that night we discover a sweet story of grace, Peter's attempt to walk on water. What began as a step of faith ended up as a belly flop of fear. If you've ever wondered what God does when we fail, then read this section and allow the hand that saved Peter to touch you.

Storms come. They come quickly. They pounce ferociously. If you are in one, then you know what I mean. If you're not in one today, you know as well as I—one may be in tomorrow's forecast.

My prayer is that this book will leave you better prepared. My prayer is that you will find some word, some story, some verse, or some thought that will convince you that he is very near. I pray that as you read you will be reminded that the same voice that stilled the rage on the Sea of Galilee can still the storm in your world.

Read on, friend, and be assured—he is closer than you've ever dreamed.

## Stress of Demands

### 1 From Calm to Chaos

Maybe you can relate to the morning I just had.

It's Sunday. Sundays are always busy days for me. Sundays are always early days for me. Today promised to be no exception.

With a full slate of activities planned, I got up early and drove to church. There was not much traffic at 6:00 a.m. I had the roads to myself. The orange of dawn had yet to break the nighttime spell on the summer's black sky. The twilight sparkled. Cool air wafted.

I parked outside my church office and took a minute to enjoy the quietude. I set down my books, picked up my coffee, and leaned against the car.

It was just the star-studded sky and me. Across the city, lights flickered. Shadowed trees slept. The night was calm: no noise, no hurry, no demands. That would all change within a couple of hours. Let a few thousand alarm clocks buzz and a few thousand garage doors open, and the serenity would be invaded as suburbia awakened. But at the moment, suburbia slept.

Life is like that sometimes. There are jaunts in life's journey that are as glassy as a midnight lake on a windless night. No noise. No rushing. No crises. There are measures in our music where the conductor silences the kettledrum, and only the flute is allowed to sing.

And sing she does. Under the spell of her song, deadlines aren't as deadly. Death is distant. Dear ones are still dear and sometimes near. The eclipsing clouds of fear and debts and angry phone calls have passed. And, for a while, your world

is moonlit.

Mine was. I sat on the hood of my car, sipped my coffee, and toasted the stars. They twinkled their response.

It was calm. But calm has a way of becoming chaos.

With a briefcase in one hand and a coffee cup in the other, I walked and whistled across the parking lot to the office door. To enter my office, I had to get past the sleeping dog of the twentieth century: the alarm system. I set down my briefcase and unlocked the door. I picked up my briefcase and walked in.

The code box on the wall was flashing a red light.

I'm not too electronically inclined, but I do know what a red light on an alarm system means: "Punch in the code, buddy, or get ready for the music." I punched in the code. Nothing happened. I punched in the code again. The little red light kept blinking. I punched it in again. Time was running out. The little light snickered at me. I could hear the message being sent up and down the wires to all the neon-eyed alarm gremlins. "Man your sirens, everybody. Ol' do-do brain is entering his bank-card number again!"

I kept pushing, the clock kept ticking, the light kept flashing, and the gremlins were getting excited. "Get ready! Ten seconds and counting. Ten, nine, eight … "

"Oh, no," I groaned, "it's about to hit."

The siren pounced on me like a mountain lion. I thought we were under nuclear attack. Floodlights flash flooded the hallway, and red strobes turned. I kept pushing buttons, and the alarm kept blaring. You'd have thought it was a breakout at Alcatraz.

My pulse raced, my forehead moistened, and my situation was desperate. I raced down the hall to my office, pulled open the lap drawer of my desk, and found the phone number of the alarm company.

I could barely hear what the man said when he answered. When I understood what he said, I could scarcely believe he had said it.

“What do you mean, ‘What’s the matter?’” I exclaimed. “Can’t you hear?”

“Yes, I punched in the code,” I screamed. “It didn’t do any good!” The next twenty minutes were loud, demanding, confusing, and aggravating. I was speaking to technicians I couldn’t see about equipment I didn’t understand trying to understand words I couldn’t hear.

That’s when the policeman came. He tapped on the window. I opened it. “I can’t get the thing to shut off!” I yelled.

“You the preacher here?” he asked.

“Yes,” I yelled.

He just shook his head and walked away, probably muttering something about what they don’t teach in theology courses.

Finally, for no apparent reason, the siren ceased. The lights shut off. What had been an air-raid shelter became an office again. I walked back to my desk, sat down, and sighed. *What a way to begin the day*. The morning lesson I had prepared was lying on my credenza. I picked it up and read the first line: “When calm becomes chaos.”

“Appropriate,” I muttered.

Ever happened to you? When was the last time your life went from calm to chaos in half a minute? (“How many examples would you like?” you ask.) When was the last time you found yourself pushing buttons that didn’t respond, struggling with instructions you couldn’t hear, or operating a system you didn’t understand?

You enter the wrong computer code and lose eighteen months worth of ledgers in a matter of seconds. Calm volcanoes into chaos.

A message on your answering machine tells you that the report you are scheduled to give next week is due tomorrow. Good-bye sleep. Hello all-nighter. Good-bye calm.

Hello chaos.

The mechanic who promised that the car would be ready today in time for the trip says, “I know I promised, but it’s much worse than we thought. Your side axle disjointed, causing the U-joint to descramble the electronic ignition that is hand-assembled in Lower Tasmania and … ”

“Grrrr.”

If you’ve ever had your spouse call you at the office and say, “Just got a letter from the IRS. They are going to audit … ”

If your boss has ever begun a conversation with these words: “You’re a good worker, but with all this talk about a recession we have to cut back … ” If your teenager has ever walked in and asked, “Does our car insurance cover the other guy’s car?”

Then you know that life can go from calm to chaos in a matter of moments. No warnings. No announcements. No preparation.

Little red lights blink, and you start pushing buttons. Sometimes you silence the alarm; sometimes it rips the air like a demon. The result can be peace or panic. The result can be calm or chaos.

It all depends on one factor: Do you know the code?

For me, this morning became chaos. Had I been prepared … had I known the code …

had I known what to do when the warning flashed … calm would have triumphed.

The next few pages will usher you into a day in Jesus’ life when the calm could have become chaos. It has all the elements of anxiety: bad news and a death threat, followed by swarming demands, interruptions, inept disciples, and a blazing temptation to follow the crowd. In twenty-four pressure-packed hours, Jesus was carried from the summit of celebration to the valley of frustration.

It was the second most stressful day of his life. As soon as one alarm was disarmed, another began blinking. The rulers threatened. The crowds pressed. The followers doubted. The people demanded. When you see what he endured that day, you will wonder how he kept his cool.

Somehow, though, he did. Although the people pressed and the problems monsooned, Jesus didn't blow up or bail out. In fact, he did just the opposite. He served people, thanked God, and made cool-headed decisions.

I want to help you see how he did it. I'd like to share with you a few "internal codes" that you desperately need. Equip yourself with these internal codes, punch them in when the red lights of your world start to flash, and you will be amazed at how quickly the alarms will be disarmed.

A few words of explanation:

If you are looking for external adjustments, you won't find them here. I won't say anything about dressing for success or power language or popularity schemes. You can buy many books that will help you externally, but this isn't one of them.

What you will discover in this book are attitudes … godly attitudes … a way of viewing people and problems as modeled by the Master.

If you want external alteration, look elsewhere. If you want internal development, read on. If you want to see how God handled—and handles—hassles, then I've got some thoughts to share with you.

Let's do something. Let's take the principles modeled by Jesus into our day-to-day whirlwind of demands and decisions. Let's take a few minutes and observe God under pressure. Let's watch his face. Listen to his words. Observe his choices. And see what we can learn. Let's watch Christ in a pressure-cooker environment and try to answer this question:

*What did Jesus know that allowed him to do what he did?*

## 2 God Under Pressure

A day in the life of Christ.

Call it a tapestry of turmoil, a noisy pictorial in which the golden threads of triumph entwine with the black, frazzled strings of tragedy.

Call it a symphony of emotions, a sunrise-to-sunset orchestration of extremes. One score is brassy with exuberance; the next moans with sorrow. On one page,

the orchestra swells in adoration. On the next, Jesus solos the ballad of loneliness.

Whatever you call it, call it real. Call it a day in which Jesus experiences more stress than he will any other day of his life—aside from his crucifixion. Before the morning becomes evening, he has reason to weep … run … shout … curse … praise … doubt.

From calm to chaos. From peace to perplexity. Within moments his world is turned upside down.

In the tapestry, though, there is one thread that sparkles. In the symphony, there is one song that soars. In the story, there is one lesson that comforts. You've heard it before, but you may have forgotten it. Look closely. Listen intently. Be reminded: Jesus knows how you feel.

If you've ever had a day in which you've been blitzkrieged by demands, if you've ever ridden the roller coaster of sorrow and celebration, if you've ever wondered if God in heaven can relate to you on earth, then read and reread about this pressure-packed day in the life of Christ.

Take heart. Jesus knows how you feel.

He begins the morning by hearing about the death of John the Baptist: his cousin, his forerunner, his coworker, his friend. The man who came closer to understanding Jesus than any other is dead.

Imagine losing the one person who knows you better than anyone else, and you will feel what Jesus is feeling. Reflect on the horror of being told that your dearest friend has just been murdered, and you will relate to Jesus' sorrow. Consider your reaction if you were told that your best friend had just been decapitated by a people-pleasing, incestuous monarch, and you'll see how the day begins for Christ. His world is beginning to turn upside down.

The emissaries brought more than news of sorrow, however; they brought a warning:

"The same Herod who took John's head is interested in yours." Listen to how Luke presents the monarch's madness: "Herod said, 'I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?' *And he tried to see him*" (emphasis mine).

Something tells me that Herod wanted more than a social visit.

So, with John's life taken and his own life threatened, Jesus chooses to get away for a while. "When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."

But before he can get away, his disciples arrive. The Gospel of Mark states that the

"apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught." They return exuberant. Jesus had commissioned them to proclaim the gospel and authenticate it with miracles. "They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them." Can you imagine the excitement? Can you envision the scene? A reunion of twelve friends. A reuniting of disciples with their teacher. A homecoming bubbling with testimonies:

• Peter describing a lame man he healed.

• John telling of a crowd he taught.

• Andrew recounting the deliverance of an epileptic.

• James relating to Jesus how the crowds followed him wherever he went.

• Matthew reporting the healing of a blind woman.

Remember, these disciples were ordinary men. They weren't orators, scholars, kings, or saints. They were fishermen and a tax collector, common laborers who, by God's power, had taken a nation by storm. The emotion? Exuberance. In a matter of moments, Jesus' heart goes from the pace of a funeral dirge to the triumphant march of a ticker-tape parade.

And look who follows the disciples to locate Jesus. About five thousand men plus women and children! Rivers of people cascade out of the hills and villages. Some scholars estimate the crowd to be as high as twenty-five thousand. They swarm around Jesus, each with one desire: to meet the man who had empowered the disciples.

What had been a calm morning now buzzes with activity. "So many people were

coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat." I've had people demand my attention. I know what it's like to have a half-dozen kids wanting different things at the same time. I know the feeling of receiving one call with two other people waiting impatiently on other lines. I even know what it's like to be encircled by a dozen or so people, each making a separate request.

But twenty-five thousand? That's larger than many cities! No wonder the disciples couldn't eat. I'm surprised they could breathe!

The morning has been a jungle trail of the unexpected. First Jesus grieves over the death of a dear friend and relative. Then his life is threatened. Next he celebrates the triumphant return of his followers. Then he is nearly suffocated by a brouhaha of humanity. Bereavement … jeopardy … jubilation … bedlam.

Are you beginning to see why I call this the second most stressful day in the life of Christ? And it's far from over.

Jesus decides to take the disciples to a quiet place where they can rest and reflect. He shouts a command over the noise of the crowd. "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." The thirteen fight their way to the beach and climb into a boat.

And, for a few precious moments, the world is quiet again. The din of the crowd grows distant and the only sound is the slap of the water against the hull. Jesus' heart is weighted by sorrow and buoyed by joy. He watches his followers swapping stories of victory. Then he raises his glance and sees on the horizon Tiberias, the city constructed by John the Baptist's murderer, Herod. Joy suddenly alloyed with indignation causes his fists to clench and his eyes to moisten.

Who would question his desire to get away from the people? He just needs a few hours alone. Just a respite. Just a retreat. Time to pray. Time to ponder. Time to weep. A time without crowds or demands. A campfire wreathed with friends. An evening with those he loves. *The people can wait until tomorrow.*

The people, however, have other ideas. "The crowds learned about it and followed him." It's a six-mile walk around the northeastern corner of the Sea of Galilee, so the crowd takes a hike. When Jesus got to Bethsaida, his desired retreat had become a roaring arena.

“Surprise!”

Add to the list of sorrow, peril, excitement, and bedlam the word *interruption*. Jesus’

plans are interrupted. What he has in mind for his day and what the people have in mind for his day are two different agendas. What Jesus seeks and what Jesus gets are not the same.

Sound familiar?

Remember when you sought a night’s rest and got a colicky baby? Remember when you sought to catch up at the office and got even further behind? Remember when you sought to use your Saturday for leisure, but ended up fixing your neighbor’s sink?

Take comfort, friend. It happened to Jesus, too.

In fact, this would be a good time to pause and digest the central message of this chapter.

*Jesus knows how you feel.*

Ponder this and use it the next time your world goes from calm to chaos.

His pulse has raced. His eyes have grown weary. His heart has grown heavy. He has had to climb out of bed with a sore throat. He has been kept awake late and has gotten up early. He knows how you feel.

You may have trouble believing that. You probably believe that Jesus knows what it means to endure heavy-duty tragedies. You are no doubt convinced that Jesus is acquainted with sorrow and has wrestled with fear. Most people accept that. But can God relate to the hassles and headaches of my life? Of your life?

For some reason this is harder to believe.

Perhaps that’s why portions of this day are recorded in all the Gospel accounts. No other event, other than the Crucifixion, is told by all four Gospel writers. Not Jesus’

baptism. Not his temptation. Not even his birth. But all four writers chronicle this day.

It's as if Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John knew that you would wonder if God understands. And they proclaim their response in four-part harmony: *Jesus knows how you feel.*

A friend of mine was recently trying to teach his six-year-old son how to shoot a basket. The boy would take the basketball and push it as hard as he could toward the goal, but it always fell short. The father would then take the ball and toss it toward the basket, saying something like, "Just do it like this, son. It's easy." Then the boy would try, and miss, again. My friend would then take the ball and make another basket, encouraging his son to push the ball a bit harder.

After several minutes and many misses, the boy responded to his father's encouragement by saying, "Yeah, but it's easy for you up there. You don't know how hard it is from down here."

You and I can never say that about God. Of the many messages Jesus taught us that day about stress, the first one is this: "God knows how you feel." Read how J. B. Phillips translates Hebrews 4:15:

For we have no superhuman High Priest to whom our weaknesses are unintelligible—he himself has shared fully in all our experience of temptation, except that he never sinned.

The writer of Hebrews is adamant almost to the point of redundancy. It's as if he anticipates our objections. It's as if he knows that we will say to God what my friend's son said to him: "God, it's easy for you up there. You don't know how hard it is from down here." So he boldly proclaims Jesus' ability to understand. Look at the wording again.

*He himself.* Not an angel. Not an ambassador. Not an emissary, but Jesus himself.

*Shared fully.* Not partially. Not nearly. Not to a large degree. Entirely! Jesus shared fully.

*In all our experience.* Every hurt. Each ache. All the stresses and all the strains. No exceptions. No substitutes. Why? So he could sympathize with our

weaknesses.

A politician dons a hardhat and enters the factory like he is one of the employees. A social worker goes to the inner city and spends the night on the streets with the homeless.

A general walks into the mess hall and sits down with the soldiers like he is one of the enlisted men.

All three want to communicate the same message: “I identify with you. I can understand. I can relate.” There is one problem, though. The factory employees know that the politician’s hardhat will come off when the television crew is gone. The derelicts know that the social worker will be in a warm bed tomorrow night. And the soldiers are well aware that for every meal the general eats in the mess hall, he’ll eat dozens in the officers’ quarters.

Try as they might, these well-meaning professionals don’t really understand. Their participation is partial. Jesus’ participation, however, was complete. The writer of Hebrews states with double clarity that Jesus “shared *fully* in *all* our experience” (emphasis mine).

A bookstore owner in the Northwest once told me about an angry lady who stomped into his store carrying my book, *God Came Near*. She slammed the book on the counter, said a few less-than-kind things about the book, and then screamed loudly enough for everyone on the block to hear, “My God didn’t have pimples!” I know the paragraph that put the spark in her tinderbox. It reads like this: Jesus may have had pimples. He may have been tone-deaf. Perhaps a girl down the street had a crush on him or vice-versa. It could be that his knees were bony. One thing’s for sure: He was, while completely divine, completely human.

I can understand why the woman became upset. I can relate to her discomfort. We quickly fix a crack in the stained glass. We rub away any smudges on the altar. There is something *safe* about a God who never had callouses. There is something *awesome* about a God who never felt pain. There is something *majestic* about a God who never scraped his elbow.

But there is also something *cold* about a God who cannot relate to what you and I feel.

If I had a moment with that lady, I would ask her, “Jesus may not have had

pimples, but don’t you hope that he could have?”

Every page of the Gospels hammers home this crucial principle: God knows how you feel. From the funeral to the factory to the frustration of a demanding schedule. Jesus understands. When you tell God that you’ve reached your limit, he knows what you mean. When you shake your head at impossible deadlines, he shakes his, too. When your plans are interrupted by people who have other plans, he nods in empathy. He has been there. He knows how you feel.

Before we resume our chronicling of this stressful day in Jesus’ life, let me take you to another day—one far more recent, in a place closer to home.

February 15, 1921. New York City. The operating room of the Kane Summit Hospital. A doctor is performing an appendectomy.

In many ways the events leading to the surgery are uneventful. The patient has complained of severe abdominal pain. The diagnosis is clear: an inflamed appendix. Dr. Evan O’Neill Kane is performing the surgery. In his distinguished thirty-seven-year medical career, he has performed nearly four thousand appendectomies, so this surgery will be uneventful in all ways except two.

The first novelty of this operation? The use of local anesthesia in major surgery. Dr. Kane is a crusader against the hazards of general anesthesia. He contends that a local application is far safer. Many of his colleagues agree with him in principle, but in order for them to agree in practice, they will have to see the theory applied.

Dr. Kane searches for a volunteer, a patient who is willing to undergo surgery while under local anesthesia. A volunteer is not easily found. Many are squeamish at the thought of being awake during their own surgery. Others are fearful that the anesthesia might wear off too soon.

Eventually, however, Dr. Kane finds a candidate. On Tuesday morning, February 15, the historic operation occurs.

The patient is prepped and wheeled into the operating room. A local anesthetic is applied. As he has done thousands of times, Dr. Kane dissects the superficial tissues and locates the appendix. He skillfully excises it and concludes the surgery. During the procedure, the patient complains of only minor discomfort.

The volunteer is taken into post-op, then placed in a hospital ward. He recovers quickly and is dismissed two days later.

Dr. Kane had proven his theory. Thanks to the willingness of a brave volunteer, Kane demonstrated that local anesthesia was a viable, and even preferable, alternative.

But I said there were two facts that made the surgery unique. I've told you the first: the use of local anesthesia. The second is the patient. The courageous candidate for surgery by Dr. Kane was Dr. Kane.

To prove his point, Dr. Kane operated on himself!

A wise move. The doctor became a patient in order to convince the patients to trust the doctor.

I've shared this story with several health professionals. They each gave me the same response: furrowed brow, suspicious grin, and the dubious words, "That's hard to believe."

Perhaps it is. But the story of the doctor who became his own patient is mild compared to the story of the God who became human. But Jesus did. So that you and I would believe that the Healer knows our hurts, he voluntarily became one of us. He placed himself in our position. He suffered our pains and felt our fears.

Rejection? He felt it. Temptation? He knew it. Loneliness? He experienced it. Death?

He tasted it.

And stress? He could write a best-selling book about it.

Why did he do it? One reason. So that when you hurt, you will go to him—your Father and your Physician—and let him heal.

**3 A Mother's Love—A Friend's Empathy**

Theresa briones is a tender, loving mother. She also has a stout left hook that she used to punch a lady in a coin laundry. Why'd she do it?

Some kids were making fun of Theresa's daughter, Alicia.

Alicia is bald. Her knees are arthritic. Her nose is pinched. Her hips are creaky. Her hearing is bad. She has the stamina of a seventy-year-old. And she is only ten.

"Mom," the kids taunted, "come and look at the monster!" Alicia weighs only twenty-two pounds and is shorter than most preschoolers. She suffers from progeria—a genetic aging disease that strikes one child in eight million. The life expectancy of progeria victims is twenty years. There are only fifteen known cases of this disease in the world.

"She is not an alien. She is not a monster," Theresa defended. "She is just like you and me."

Mentally, Alicia is a bubbly, fun-loving third grader. She has a long list of friends.

She watches television in a toddler-sized rocking chair. She plays with Barbie dolls and teases her younger brother.

Theresa has grown accustomed to the glances and questions. She is patient with the constant curiosity. Genuine inquiries she accepts. Insensitive slanders she does not.

The mother of the finger-pointing children came to investigate. "I see 'it,'" she told the kids.

"My child is not an 'it,'" Theresa stated. Then she decked the woman.

Who could blame her? Such is the nature of parental love. Mothers and fathers have a God-given ability to love their children regardless of imperfections. Not because the parents are blind. Just the opposite. They see vividly.

Theresa sees Alicia's inability as clearly as anyone. But she also sees Alicia's value.

So does God.

God sees us with the eyes of a Father. He sees our defects, errors, and blemishes.

But he also sees our value.

Two chapters ago, I closed with this question: What did Jesus know that enabled him to do what he did?

Here's part of the answer. He knew the value of people. He knew that each human being is a treasure. And because he did, people were not a source of stress, but a source of joy.

When Jesus lands on the shore of Bethsaida, he leaves the Sea of Galilee and steps into a sea of humanity. Keep in mind, he has crossed the sea to get *away* from the crowds. He needs to grieve. He longs to relax with his followers. He needs anything but another crowd of thousands to teach and heal.

But his love for people overcomes his need for rest.

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing.

It is doubtful that anyone in the crowd thinks to ask Jesus how he is doing. There is no indication that anyone is concerned with how Jesus is feeling. No one has come to give; all have come to take.

In our house we call 5:00 p.m. the piranha hour. That's the time of day when everyone wants a piece of Mom. Sara, the baby, is hungry. Andrea wants Mom to read her a book. Jenna wants help with her homework. And I—the ever-loving, ever-sensitive husband—want Denalyn to drop everything and talk to me about my day.

When is your piranha hour? When do people in your world demand much and offer little?

Every boss has had a day in which the requests outnumber the results. There's not a businessperson alive who hasn't groaned as an armada of assignments docks at his or her desk. For the teacher, the piranha hour often begins when the

first student enters and ends when the last student leaves.

Piranha hours: parents have them, bosses endure them, secretaries dread them, teachers are besieged by them, and Jesus taught us how to live through them successfully.

When hands extended and voices demanded, Jesus responded with love. He did so because the code within him disarmed the alarm. The code is worth noting: "People are precious."

I can hear somebody raising an objection at this point. "Yes, but it was easier for Jesus. He was God. He could do more than I can. After all, he was divine." True, Jesus was equally God and man. But don't be too quick to dismiss what he did.

Consider his loving response from another angle.

Consider that, along with his holy strength, he also had a holy awareness. There were no secrets on the mountain that day; Jesus knew the hearts of each person. He knew why they were there and what they would do.

Matthew writes that Jesus "healed their sick." Not *some* of their sick. Not the *righteous* among the sick. Not the *deserving* among the sick. But "*the sick.*" Surely, among the many thousands, there were a few people unworthy of good health.

The same divinity that gave Jesus the power to heal also gave him the power to perceive. I wonder if Jesus was tempted to say to the rapist, "Heal you? After what you've done?" Or to the child molester, "Why should I restore your health?" Or to the bigot, "Get out of here, buddy, and take your arrogance with you." And he could see not only their past, he could see their future.

Undoubtedly, there were those in the multitude who would use their newfound health to hurt others. Jesus released tongues that would someday curse. He gave sight to eyes that would lust. He healed hands that would kill.

Many of those he healed would never say "thank you," but he healed them anyway.

Most would be more concerned with being healthy than being holy, but he healed them anyway. Some of those who asked for bread today would cry for his

blood a few months later, but he healed them anyway.

Jesus chose to do what you and I seldom, if ever, choose to do. He chose to give gifts to people, knowing full well that those gifts could be used for evil.

Don't be too quick to attribute Jesus' compassion to his divinity. Remember both sides. For each time Jesus healed, he had to overlook the future and the past.

Something, by the way, that he still does.

Have you noticed that God doesn't ask you to prove that you will put your salary to good use? Have you noticed that God doesn't turn off your oxygen supply when you misuse his gifts? Aren't you glad that God doesn't give you only that which you remember to thank him for? (Has it been a while since you thanked God for your spleen? Me, too. But I still have one.)

God's goodness is spurred by his nature, not by our worthiness.

Someone asked an associate of mine, "What biblical precedent do we have to help the poor who have no desire to become Christians?"

My friend responded with one word: "God."

God does it daily, for millions of people.

What did Jesus know that allowed him to do what he did? What internal code kept his calm from erupting into chaos? He knew the value of people.

Interestingly, the stress seen that day is not on Jesus' face, but on the faces of the disciples. "Send the crowds away," they demand. Fair request. "After all," they are saying, "you've taught them. You've healed them. You've accommodated them. And now they're getting hungry. If we don't send them away, they'll want you to feed them, too!"

I wish I could have seen the expression on the disciples' faces when they heard the Master's response. "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." I used to think that this was a rhetorical request. I used to think that Jesus knew the disciples couldn't feed the crowd, but that he asked them anyway. I used to think that it was a "test" to teach them to rely on God for what they couldn't do.

I don’t see it like that anymore.

I still think it was a test—not a test to show them what they couldn’t do, but a test to demonstrate what they could do. After all, they had just gone on tour achieving the impossible. Jesus is asking them to do it again. “You give them something to eat.” I wish I could tell you that the disciples did it. I wish I could say that they knew God wouldn’t ask them to do something he wouldn’t empower them to do, so they fed the crowd. I wish I could tell you that the disciples miraculously fed the five thousand men plus women and children.

But I can’t … because they didn’t.

Rather than look to God, they looked in their wallets. “That would take eight months of a man’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

“Y-y-y-you’ve got to be kidding.”

“He can’t be serious.”

“It’s one of Jesus’ jokes.”

“Do you know how many people are out there?”

Eyes watermelon-wide. Jaws dangling open. One ear hearing the din of the crowd, the other the command of God.

Don’t miss the contrasting views. When Jesus saw the people, he saw an opportunity to love and affirm value. When the disciples saw the people, they saw thousands of problems.

Also, don’t miss the irony. In the midst of a bakery—in the presence of the Eternal Baker—they tell the “Bread of Life” that there is no bread.

How silly we must appear to God.

Here’s where Jesus should have given up. This is the point in the pressure-packed day where Jesus should have exploded. The sorrow, the life threats, the exuberance, the crowds, the interruptions, the demands, and now this. His own disciples can’t do what he asks them. In front of five thousand men, they let him

down.

“Beam me up, Father,” should have been Jesus’ next words. But they weren’t. Instead he inquires, “How many loaves do you have?”

The disciples bring him a little boy’s lunch. A lunch pail becomes a banquet, and all are fed. No word of reprimand is given. No furrowed brow of anger is seen. No

“I-told-you-so” speech is delivered. The same compassion Jesus extends to the crowd is extended to his friends.

Look at this day one more time. Review what our Lord faced.

*Intense sorrow*—the death of a dear friend and relative.

*Immediate threat*—his name is on the wanted poster.

*Immeasurable joy*—a homecoming with his followers.

*Immense crowds*—a Niagara of people followed him everywhere.

*Insensitive interruptions*—he sought rest and got people.

*Incredible demands*—crowds of thousands clamored for his touch.

*Inept assistance*—the one and only time he asked for help, he got a dozen

“you’re-pulling-my-leg” expressions.

But the calm within Christ never erupted. The alarm never sounded. What did Jesus know that enabled him to do what he did? He knew the incredible value of people. As a result:

• He didn’t stamp his feet and demand his own way.

• He didn’t tell the disciples to find another beach where there were no people.

• He didn’t ask the crowds why they hadn’t brought their own food.

• He didn’t send the apostles back into the field for more training.

• Most important, he stayed calm in the midst of chaos. He even paused, in the midst of it all, to pray a prayer of thanks.

A boy went into a pet shop, looking for a puppy. The store owner showed him a litter in a box. The boy looked at the puppies. He picked each one up, examined it, and put it back into the box.

After several minutes, he walked back to the owner and said, “I picked one out. How much will it cost?”

The man gave him the price, and the boy promised to be back in a few days with the money. “Don’t take too long,” the owner cautioned. “Puppies like these sell quickly.” The boy turned and smiled knowingly, “I’m not worried,” he said. “Mine will still be here.”

The boy went to work—weeding, washing windows, cleaning yards. He worked hard and saved his money. When he had enough for the puppy, he returned to the store.

He walked up to the counter and laid down a pocketful of wadded bills. The store owner sorted and counted the cash. After verifying the amount, he smiled at the boy and said, “All right, son, you can go get your puppy.”

The boy reached into the back of the box, pulled out a skinny dog with a limp leg, and started to leave.

The owner stopped him.

“Don’t take that puppy,” he objected. “He’s crippled. He can’t play. He’ll never run with you. He can’t fetch. Get one of the healthy pups.”

“No thank you, sir,” the boy replied. “This is exactly the kind of dog I’ve been looking for.”

As the boy turned to leave, the store owner started to speak but remained silent.

Suddenly he understood. For extending from the bottom of the boy’s trousers was a brace—a brace for his crippled leg.

Why did the boy want the dog? Because he knew how it felt. And he knew it

was very special.

What did Jesus know that enabled him to do what he did? He knew how the people felt, and he knew that they were special.

I hope you never forget that.

Jesus knows how you feel. You're under the gun at work? Jesus knows how you feel.

You've got more to do than is humanly possible? So did he. You've got children who make a "piranha hour" out of your dinner hour? Jesus knows what that's like. People take more from you than they give? Jesus understands. Your teenagers won't listen? Your students won't try? Your employees give you blank stares when you assign tasks?

Believe me, friend, Jesus knows how you feel.

You are precious to him. So precious that he became like you so that you would come to him.

When you struggle, he listens. When you yearn, he responds. When you question, he hears. He has been there. You've heard that before, but you need to hear it again.

He loves you with the love of a Theresa Briones.

He understands you with the compassion of the crippled boy.

Like Theresa, he battles with hell itself to protect you.

And, like the boy, he paid a great price to take you home.

**4 When Fishermen Don't Fish**

They were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

It’s a good thing those verses weren’t written about me.

It’s a good thing thousands of people weren’t depending on Max for their teaching and nourishment. Especially on a day when I’d just heard of the death of a dear friend.

Especially on a day when I wanted to be alone with my friends. Especially after I’d gotten into a boat to escape the crowds. Had that been me in Jesus’ sandals on that Bethsaida beach, the verses would read something like: They were like sheep without a shepherd. So Max told them to quit grazing on his pasture and to head back to their pens.

When Max landed and saw a large crowd, he mumbled something about how hard it was to get a day off and radioed for the helicopter. Then he and the disciples escaped to a private retreat.

It’s a good thing I wasn’t responsible for those people. I would have been in no mood to teach them, no mood to help them. I would have had no desire even to be with them.

But, as I think about it, Jesus had no desire to be with them either. After all, he did leave them, didn’t he? He had every intention of getting away and being alone. So what happened? Why didn’t he tell them to get lost? What made him change his mind and spend the day with the people he was trying to avoid?

Answer? Take a look at five words in Matthew 14:14:

“He had compassion on them.”

The Greek word used for compassion in this passage is *splanchnizomai*, which won’t mean much to you unless you are in the health professions and studied “splanchnology” in school. If so, you remember that “splanchnology” is a study of the visceral parts. Or, in contemporary jargon, a study of the gut.

When Matthew writes that Jesus had compassion on the people, he is not saying that Jesus felt casual pity for them. No, the term is far more graphic. Matthew is saying that Jesus felt their hurt in his gut:

• He felt the limp of the crippled.

• He felt the hurt of the diseased.

• He felt the loneliness of the leper.

• He felt the embarrassment of the sinful.

And once he felt their hurts, he couldn't help but heal their hurts. He was moved in the stomach by their needs. He was so touched by their needs that he forgot his own needs. He was so moved by the people's hurts that he put his hurts on the back burner.

Maybe that's why God brings hurting people into your world, too. All solitude and no service equals selfishness. Some solitude and some service, however, equals perspective.

Here's a story to illustrate my point.

When I was in high school, our family used to fish every year during spring break.

One year my brother and my mom couldn't go, so my dad let me invite a friend. I asked Mark. He was a good pal and a great sport. He got permission from his parents, and we began planning our trip.

Days before leaving, we could already anticipate the vacation. We could feel the sun warming our bodies as we floated in the boat. We could feel the yank of the rod and hear the spin of the reel as we wrestled the white bass into the boat. And we could smell the fish frying in an open skillet over an open fire.

We could hardly wait. Days passed like cold molasses. Finally spring break arrived.

We loaded our camper and set out for the lake.

We arrived late at night, unfolded the camper, and went to bed—dreaming of tomorrow's day in the sun. But during the night, an unseasonably strong norther blew in.

It got cold fast! The wind was so strong that we could barely open the camper door the next morning. The sky was gray. The lake was a mountain range of

white-topped waves.

There was no way we could fish in that weather.

“No problem,” we said. “We’ll spend the day in the camper. After all, we have Monopoly. We have *Reader’s Digest*. We all know a few jokes. It’s not what we came to do, but we’ll make the best of it and fish tomorrow.” So, huddled in the camper with a Coleman stove and a Monopoly board, we three fishermen passed the day—indoors. The hours passed slowly, but they did pass. Night finally came, and we crawled into the sleeping bags dreaming of angling.

Were we in for a surprise. The next morning it wasn’t the wind that made the door hard to open, it was the ice!

We tried to be cheerful. “No problem,” we mumbled. “We can play Monopoly …

again. We can reread the stories in *Reader’s Digest.* And surely we know another joke or two.” But as courageous as we tried to be, it was obvious that some of the gray had left the sky and entered our camper.

I began to notice a few things I hadn’t seen before. I noticed that Mark had a few personality flaws. He was a bit too cocky about his opinions. He was easily irritated and constantly edgy. He couldn’t take any constructive criticism. Even though his socks did stink, he didn’t think it was my business to tell him.

“Just looking out for the best interest of my dad’s camper,” I defended, expecting Dad to come to my aid.

But Dad just sat over in the corner, reading. *Humph*, I thought, *where is he when I need him?* And then, I began to see Dad in a different light. When I mentioned to him that the eggs were soggy and the toast was burnt, he invited me to try my hand at the portable stove. *Touchy, touchy*, I said to myself. *Nothing like being cooped up in a camper with someone to help you see his real nature.*

It was a long day. It was a long, cold night.

When we awoke the next morning to the sound of sleet slapping the canvas, we didn’t even pretend to be cheerful. We were flat-out grumpy. Mark became more of a jerk with each passing moment; I wondered what spell of ignorance I must

have been in when I invited him. Dad couldn't do anything right; I wondered how someone so irritable could have such an even-tempered son. We sat in misery the whole day, our fishing equipment still unpacked.

The next day was even colder. "We're going home" were my father's first words. No one objected.

I learned a hard lesson that week. Not about fishing, but about people.

When those who are called to fish don't fish, they fight.

When energy intended to be used outside is used inside, the result is explosive.

Instead of casting nets, we cast stones. Instead of extending helping hands, we point accusing fingers. Instead of being fishers of the lost, we become critics of the saved.

Rather than helping the hurting, we hurt the helpers.

The result? Church Scrooges. "Bah humbug" spirituality. Beady eyes searching for warts on others while ignoring the warts on the nose below. Crooked fingers that bypass strengths and point out weaknesses.

Split churches. Poor testimonies. Broken hearts. Legalistic wars.

And, sadly, poor go unfed, confused go uncounseled, and lost go unreached.

When those who are called to fish don't fish, they fight.

But note the other side of this fish tale: When those who are called to fish, fish—they flourish!

Nothing handles a case of the gripes like an afternoon service project. Nothing restores perspective better than a visit to a hospital ward. Nothing unites soldiers better than a common task.

Leave soldiers inside the barracks with no time on the front line and see what happens to their attitude. The soldiers will invent things to complain about. Bunks will be too hard. Food will be too cold. Leadership will be too tough. The company will be too stale. Yet place those same soldiers in the trench and let

them duck a few bullets, and what was a boring barracks will seem like a haven. The beds will feel great. The food will be almost ideal. The leadership will be courageous. The company will be exciting.

When those who are called to fish, fish—they flourish!

Jesus knew that.

When he arrived at Bethsaida, he was sorrowful, tired, and anxious to be alone with the disciples. No one would have blamed him had he dismissed the crowds a second time.

No one would have criticized him had he waved away the people. But he didn't. Later he would. Later he would demand their departure and seek solitude.

But not before he "healed their sick" and taught them "many things." Self was forgotten … others were served … and stress was relieved.

Make a note of that. The next time the challenges "outside" tempt you to shut the door and stay inside, stay long enough to get warm. Then get out. When those who are called to fish don't fish, they fight.

**5The Joy in the Journey** She sat in 14E, and I sat in 14D.

She was rural, and I was urban. She was backward, and I was sophisticated. She was homey, and I was "professional." But she could see, and I was blind.

"They sure do put these seats close up against each other, don't they," she said as I sat down.

Her face was ten inches from mine. She had basset-hound cheeks; her eyebrows peaked over her nose; and her jowls sagged. She smiled so widely you could see the cavity on her upper side. Her neck seemed to lean out of her shoulders at a forty-five-degree angle, leaving her head in front of her shoulders rather than above them.

She wore a Dutch-bob haircut and a blue, velour pants suit.

I don't know if she was old or just looked old. But I do know one thing: She'd never flown.

“I don’t do this too much, do you?”

When I told her I did, her eyes widened. “Oooh, that must be fu-un.” (She could add a syllable to any word.)

I groaned to myself. I already had a bad attitude. My week had been hectic. The plane was late and overbooked. I had a toothache and had left the tooth medicine at the hotel. I wanted to sleep, but I had work to do. And now I was sitting next to Gomer Pyle’s mother.

“Oooh, boy, look at that one!”

She pointed at the plane ahead of us on the runway.

“Is this one that big?”

“Yes.” I hoped my brief response would show her that I wasn’t up for chitchat. It didn’t.

“I’m going to see my boy in Dallas. Do you ever go to Dallas? I hope he’s OK. He had a stomach flu last week. He’s got a new dog. I can’t wait to see it. It’s a Labrador. Do you know what that is? They are big and lovable and … ” She was uncanny. Not only could she add a syllable to every word, she could answer her own questions.

As we were taking off, however, she got quiet. For several moments she said nothing.

Then she suddenly let out a sound that would have called the pigs for dinner.

“Oooooeeee, those trees down there look like peat moss!” People seated around us turned and stared like I was E. F. Hutton.

“What river is that?”

I told her I didn’t know, so she flagged down a stewardess.

When the drinks came around, I asked for a Coke; she asked for the list.

“Tell me again?” So the stewardess told her again. “Oh, it’s so hard to choose,”

she giggled. But she finally chose.

When they brought her the drink, she exclaimed that she didn't know apple juice came in cans. And when they brought her a sandwich, she opened the box and proclaimed loud enough for the pilot to hear, "Why, they even put mayonnaise in here." When I pulled out my laptop computer, she was enthralled. "Now isn't that clever." And that went on … the whole flight. She didn't miss a thing. If she wasn't staring out the window, she was amazed by a magazine. If she wasn't talking, she was

"oooh-ing." She played with her fan. She turned her light on and off. She toyed with her seat belt. She savored her lunch. When we went through turbulence, I looked over at her to be sure she was all right, and she was grinning. You'd have thought she was riding the Ferris wheel at the county fair!

It occurred to me, about mid-journey, that she was the only person enjoying the trip.

The rest of us, the "sophisticated," were too mature to have fun. The man in front of me was discussing business trips to Japan, dropping more names than the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The fellow behind me was ordering beers—two at a time. The lady to my right was up to her eyebrows in paperwork. And I was staring at a computer screen—eyes tired, mouth hurting, stressed-out, trying to find a message for stress-filled people and never noticing that the message was sitting beside me.

And I might never have noticed had she not leaned over and said to me at the end of the flight. "Son, I may be out of place in saying this, but you've worked the entire trip.

You need to relax, boy. You need to put that machine up and enjoy the journey." Gulp.

I smiled weakly and mumbled some excuse about needing to get the work done before tomorrow. But she wasn't listening. She was squeezing her hands together in excitement as we landed.

"Wasn't that a fu-un trip?" she asked as we were leaving the plane.

I didn't say anything. I just nodded and smiled. Off she walked, bouncing down

the concourse as curious as a six-year-old. I watched her as long as I could, then turned to go to my next flight with a lesson learned.

I resolved to keep my eyes open.

It does little good, I decided, to make the trip and miss the journey.

## 6 Remarkable

Something happened a few weeks ago that could be filed in the folder labeled

"Remarkable."

I was playing basketball at the church one Saturday morning. (A good number of guys show up each week to play.) Some are flat-bellies—guys in their twenties who can touch their toes when they stretch and touch the rim when they jump. The rest of us are fat-bellies—guys who are within eyesight of, if not over the top of, the hill. Touching our toes is no longer an option. Looking down and *seeing* our toes is the current challenge.

We never touch the rim when we jump and seldom touch it when we shoot.

But the flat-bellies don't mind if the fat-bellies play. (They don't have a choice. We have the keys to the building.)

Anyway, a few Saturdays back we were in the middle of a game when I went up for a rebound. I must have been pretty slow because, just as I was going up for the ball, someone else was already coming down with it. And the only thing I got from the jump was a finger in the eye.

When I opened my eye, everything was blurry. I knew my contact lens was not where it used to be. I thought I felt it in the corner of my eye, so I waved out of the game and ran to the rest room. But after I looked in the mirror, I realized that it must have fallen out on the floor somewhere.

I ran back onto the court. The guys were at the opposite end, leaving the goal under which I had lost my contact lens vacant.

I hurried out, got down on my knees, and began to search. No luck. When the fellows started bringing the ball downcourt, they saw what I was doing and came

to help. All ten of us were down on our knees, panting like puppies and sweating like Pony Express horses.

But no one could find the silly lens.

We were just about to give up when one fellow exclaimed, “There it is.” I looked up.

He was pointing at a player’s shoulder. The same guy whose finger had explored my cornea.

There, on his shoulder, was my lens. It had fallen on him … stuck to his skin …

stayed on his back all the way down the court while he jumped and bounced … and then ridden all the way back.

Remarkable.

Even more remarkable when you consider that the contact lens made this round trip on the back of a flat-belly. One of the guys who can touch the rim and his toes. Had it landed on the shoulder of one of the “top-of-the-hill guys,” no one would have been impressed. Some of us have the mobility of grazing buffalo. But when you think of the ride the tiny piece of plastic took, when you think of the odds of it being found, you have only one place to put this event: in the folder labeled “Remarkable.” The more I thought about this event, the more remarkable it became.

The more remarkable it became, the more I learned about remarkable things.

I learned that remarkable things usually occur in unremarkable situations, i.e., Saturday morning basketball games.

I also noticed that there are more remarkable things going on than those I usually see.

In fact, as I began to look around, I found more and more things that I’d labeled “To be expected” that deserve to be labeled “Well what do you know.” Examples?

My money is in a bank with at least several thousand other folks’ money. Who

knows how many transactions are made every day? Who knows how much money goes into that place and is taken out? But somehow, if I want some money or just want to know how much money I have, the bank teller can give me what I want.

Remarkable.

Each morning I climb into a truck that weighs half a ton and take it out on an interstate where I—and a thousand other drivers—turn our vehicles into sixty-mile-per-hour missiles. Although I've had a few scares and mishaps, I still whistle while I drive at a speed that would have caused my great-grandfather to pass out.

Remarkable.

Every day I have the honor of sitting down with a book that contains the words of the One who created me. Every day I have the opportunity to let him give me a thought or two on how to live.

If I don't do what he says, he doesn't burn the book or cancel my subscription. If I disagree with what he says, lightning doesn't split my swivel chair or an angel doesn't mark my name off the holy list. If I don't understand what he says, he doesn't call me a dummy.

In fact, he calls me "Son," and on a different page explains what I don't understand.

Remarkable.

At the end of the day when I walk through the house, I step into the bedrooms of three little girls. Their covers are usually kicked off, so I cover them up. Their hair usually hides their faces, so I brush it back. And one by one, I bend over and kiss the foreheads of the angels God has loaned me. Then I stand in the doorway and wonder why in the world he would entrust a stumbling, fumbling fellow like me with the task of loving and leading such treasures.

Remarkable.

Then I go and crawl into bed with a woman far wiser than I … a woman who deserves a man much better looking than I … but a woman who would argue

that fact and tell me from the bottom of her heart that I'm the best thing to come down her pike.

After I think about the wife I have, and when I think that I get to be with her for a lifetime, I shake my head and thank the God of grace for grace and think, *Remarkable*.

In the morning, I'll do it all again. I'll drive down the same road. Go to the same office. Call on the same bank. Kiss the same girls. And crawl into bed with the same woman. But I'm learning not to take these everyday miracles for granted.

Just think, it all came out of a basketball game. Ever since I found that contact, I've seen things a lot clearer.

I'm discovering many things: traffic jams eventually clear up, sunsets are for free, Little League is a work of art, and most planes take off and arrive on time. I'm learning that most folks are good folks who are just as timid as I am about starting a conversation.

I'm meeting people who love their country and their God and their church and would die for any of the three.

I'm learning that if I look … if I open my eyes and observe … there are many reasons to take off my hat, look at the Source of it all, and just say thanks.

**7 Thanks for the Bread**

Dear friend,

I'm writing to say thanks. I wish I could thank you personally, but I don't know where you are. I wish I could call you, but I don't know your name. If I knew your appearance, I'd look for you, but your face is fuzzy in my memory. But I'll never forget what you did.

There you were, leaning against your pickup in the West Texas oil field. An engineer of some sort. A supervisor on the job. Your khakis and clean shirt set you apart from us roustabouts. In the oil field pecking order, we were at the bottom. You were the boss. We were the workers. You read the blueprints. We dug the ditches. You inspected the pipe.

We laid it. You ate with the bosses in the shed. We ate with each other in the shade.

Except that day.

I remember wondering why you did it.

We weren't much to look at. What wasn't sweaty was oily. Faces burnt from the sun; skin black from the grease. Didn't bother me, though. I was there only for the summer. A high-school boy earning good money laying pipe. For me, it was a summer job. For the others, it was a way of life. Most were illegal immigrants from Mexico. Others were drifters, bouncing across the prairie as rootless as tumbleweeds.

We weren't much to listen to, either. Our language was sandpaper coarse. After lunch, we'd light the cigarettes and begin the jokes. Someone always had a deck of cards with lacy-clad girls on the back. For thirty minutes in the heat of the day, the oil patch became Las Vegas—replete with foul language, dirty stories, blackjack, and barstools that doubled as lunch pails.

In the middle of such a game, you approached us. I thought you had a job for us that couldn't wait another few minutes. Like the others, I groaned when I saw you coming.

You were nervous. You shifted your weight from one leg to the other as you began to speak.

"Uh, fellows," you started.

We turned and looked up at you.

"I, uh, I just wanted, uh, to invite … "

You were way out of your comfort zone. I had no idea what you might be about to say, but I knew that it had nothing to do with work.

"I just wanted to tell you that, uh, our church is having a service tonight and, uh … "

"What?" I couldn't believe it. "He's talking church? Out here? With us?"

“I wanted to invite any of you to come along.”

Silence. Screaming silence. The same silence you’d hear if a nun asked a madam if she could use the brothel for a mass. The same silence you’d hear if an IRS

representative invited the Mafia to a seminar on tax integrity.

Several guys stared at the dirt. A few shot glances at the others. Snickers rose just inches from the surface.

“Well, that’s it. Uh, if any of you want to go … uh, let me know.” After you turned and left, we turned and laughed. We called you “reverend,”

“preacher,” and “the pope.” We poked fun at each other, daring one another to go. You became the butt of the day’s jokes.

I’m sure you knew that. I’m sure you went back to your truck knowing the only good you’d done was to make a good fool out of yourself. If that’s what you thought, then you were wrong.

That’s the reason for this letter.

I thought of you this week. I thought of you when I read about someone else who took a risk at lunch. I thought of you when I read the story of the little boy who gave his lunch to Jesus.

His lunch wasn’t much. In fact, it wasn’t anything compared to what was needed for more than five thousand people.

He probably wrestled with the silliness of it all. What was one lunch for so many? He probably asked himself if it was even worth the effort.

How far could one lunch go?

I think that’s why he didn’t give the lunch to the crowd. Instead he gave it to Jesus.

Something told him that if he would plant the seed, God would grant the crop.

So he did.

He summoned his courage, got up off the grass, and walked into the circle of grownups. He was as out of place in that cluster as you were in ours. He must have been nervous. No one likes to appear silly.

Someone probably snickered at him, too.

If they didn't snicker, they shook their heads. "The little fellow doesn't know any better."

If they didn't shake their heads, they rolled their eyes. "Here we have a hunger crisis, and this little boy thinks that a sack lunch will solve it." But it wasn't the men's heads or eyes that the boy saw; he saw only Jesus.

You must have seen Jesus, too, when you made your decision. Most people would have considered us to be unlikely deacon material. Most would have saved their seeds for softer soil. And they'd have been almost right. But Jesus said to give … so you gave.

As I think about it, you and the little boy have a lot in common:

• You both used your lunch to help others.

• You both chose faith over logic.

• You both brought a smile to your Father's face.

There's one difference, though. The boy got to see what Jesus did with his gift, and you didn't. That's why I'm writing. I want you to know that at least one of the seeds fell into a fertile crevice.

Some five years later, a college sophomore was struggling with a decision. He had drifted from the faith given to him by his parents. He wanted to come back. He wanted to come home. But the price was high. His friends might laugh. His habits would have to change. His reputation would have to be overcome.

Could he do it? Did he have the courage?

That's when I thought of you. As I sat in my dorm room late one night, looking for the guts to do what I knew was right, I thought of you.

I thought of how your love for God had been greater than your love for your reputation.

I thought of how your obedience had been greater than your common sense.

I remembered how you had cared more about making disciples than about making a good first impression. And when I thought of you, your memory became my motivation.

So I came home.

I've told your story dozens of times to thousands of people. Each time the reaction is the same: The audience becomes a sea of smiles, and heads bob in understanding. Some smile because they think of the "clean-shirted engineers" in their lives. They remember the neighbor who brought the cake, the aunt who wrote the letter, the teacher who listened …

Others smile because they have done what you did. And they, too, wonder if their

"lunchtime loyalty" was worth the effort.

You wondered that. What you did that day wasn't much. And I'm sure you walked away that day thinking that your efforts had been wasted.

They weren't.

So I'm writing to say thanks. Thanks for the example. Thanks for the courage.

Thanks for giving your lunch to God. He did something with it; it became the Bread of Life for me.

Gratefully,

Max

P.S. If by some remarkable coincidence you read this and remember that day, please give me a call. I owe you lunch.

**8 Musings in Minneapolis**

It’s a long way from Boston, Massachusetts to Edmonton, Canada. No matter how you cut it or route it, it’s a long way.

My journey today began around 1:30 p.m. I spoke where I was supposed to speak and changed into my Reeboks just in time to fight traffic all the way to Logan Airport.

The plane was overbooked; some folks were mad. The plane was also designed by a five-foot, four-inch engineer who hates tall people. (I ate my knees for lunch.) The plane arrived late into Minneapolis, where I was to change planes.

Now, I know I’m not supposed to complain. I’ve heard myself preach sermons on gratitude. And I know that a million people in the world would love to have the airline peanuts I threw away today. But still, I got off the plane with a cramp in my leg, an empty stomach, a bad attitude, and three more hours of travel to go.

On the way to my next plane, I saw a McDonald’s. Looked good. Did I have time?

Then I saw something better: a phone.

I walked over, set down my bags, and called home. Denalyn answered. I love it when she answers. She’s always glad when I call. When she gets to heaven, Saint Peter will give her the receptionist job at the gate.

We spent twenty minutes talking about major Pentagon-level topics like the weather in New England and the weather in San Antonio. We talked about the fact that Jenna had a friend coming over to spend the night and that Sara might have a fever. I told her about the Canadian, French-speaking English teacher I sat next to on the plane, and she told me about the new elementary school.

We made no decisions. We solved no problems. We resolved no major conflicts. We just talked. And I felt better.

Jenna got on the phone and asked me when I was coming home, and it felt good to be wanted.

Andrea got on the phone and told me she loved me, and it felt good to be loved.

Jenna put the phone next to baby Sara's ear, and I talked baby talk in the middle of the airport. (Some people turned to stare.) But I didn't care because Sara cooed, and it felt good to be cooed at.

Denalyn got back on the phone and said, "I'm glad you called." And I hung up happy.

Now I'm back on the plane and my attitude is back on track. The plane is delayed because the runway is backed up, which means I'll get into Edmonton an hour later than I planned. I don't know who is going to pick me up, and I can't remember to whom I'm supposed to speak tomorrow. But that's OK.

I can handle being a pilgrim as long as I know that I can call home whenever I want.

Jesus could … and he did.

Maybe that's the rationale behind verse 19 of Matthew 14: "Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves." I'd always chalked this prayer up to, at best, a good example—at worst, a good habit.

Until now.

Now it occurs to me that Jesus needed to call home in the middle of the hassles as much as I did. He was surrounded by people who wanted food and disciples who wanted a break. His heart was heavy from the death of John the Baptist.

He needed a minute with someone who would understand.

Maybe he, like me, got a bit weary of the hassles of getting a job done in a distant land and needed to call home.

So he did. He chatted with the One he loved. He heard the sound of the home he missed. And he was reminded that when all hell breaks loose, all heaven draws near.

Maybe you should call home, too. God will be glad when you do—but not half as glad as you will be.

## 9 Fending off the Voices

You want success? Here's your model. You want achievement? Here's your prototype. You want bright lights, pageants, and media attention? Consider the front-page, center article of the nation's largest daily newspaper.

It is a caricature of "Miss America." The "vital" data of the fifty-one participants has been compiled to present the perfect woman. She has brown hair. She has brown eyes.

She knows how to sing and has a perfect figure: 35–24–35. She is Miss America. She is the ideal.

The message trumpets off the page: "This is the standard for American women." The implication is clear: Do what it takes to be like her. Firm your thighs. Deepen your cleavage. Pamper your hair. Improve your walk.

No reference is made to her convictions … to her honesty … to her faith … or to her God. But you are told her hip size.

In a small photo, four inches to the left, is another woman. Her face is thin. Her skin is wrinkled, almost leathery. No makeup … no blush … no lipstick. There is a faint smile on her lips and a glint in her eyes.

She looks pale. Perhaps it's my imagination or perhaps it's true. The caption reads,

"Mother Teresa: In serious condition."

Mother Teresa. You know her story. When she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985, she gave the two hundred thousand dollars to the poor of Calcutta. When a businessman bought her a new car, she sold it and gave the money to the underprivileged. She owns nothing. She owes nothing.

Two women: Miss America and Mother Teresa. One walks the boardwalk; the other works the alley. Two voices. One promises crowns, flowers, and crowds. The other promises service, surrender, and joy.

Now, I have nothing against beauty pageants (although I have my reservations about them). But I do have something against the lying voices that noise our

world.

You've heard them. They tell you to swap your integrity for a new sale. To barter your convictions for an easy deal. To exchange your devotion for a quick thrill.

They whisper. They woo. They taunt. They tantalize. They flirt. They flatter. "Go ahead, it's OK." "Just wait until tomorrow." "Don't worry, no one will know." "How could anything that feels so right be so wrong?"

The voices of the crowd.

Our lives are Wall Streets of chaos, stock markets loud with demands. Grown men and women barking in a frenzied effort to get all they can before time runs out. "Buy.

Sell. Trade. Swap. But whatever you do, do it fast—and loud." A carnival of gray-flannel suits where no one smiles and everyone dashes.

An endless chorus of booming voices: some offering, some taking, and all screaming.

What do we do with the voices?

As I work on this manuscript, I'm seated at a desk in a hotel room. I'm away from home. Away from people who know me. Away from family members who love me.

Voices that encourage and affirm are distant.

But voices that tantalize and entice are near. Although the room is quiet, if I listen, their voices are crystal clear.

A placard on my nightstand invites me to a lounge in the lobby, where I can "make new friends in a relaxing atmosphere." An advertisement on top of the television promises me that with the request of a late-night adult movie my "fantasies will come true." In the phone book, several columns of escort services offer "love away from home." An attractive, gold-lettered volume in the drawer of the nightstand beckons: *The Book of Mormon—Another Testament of Jesus Christ.* On television a talk-show host discusses the day's topic: "How to succeed at sex in the office." Voices. Some for pleasure. Some for power.

Some promise acceptance. Some promise tenderness. But all promise something.

Even the voices that Jesus heard promised something.

“After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’” To the casual observer, these are the voices of victory. To the untrained ear, these are the sounds of triumph. What could be better? Five thousand men plus women and children proclaiming Christ to be the prophet. Thousands of voices swelling into a roar of revival, an ovation of adulation.

The people have everything they need for a revolution.

They have an enemy: Herod. They have a martyr: John the Baptist. They have leadership: the disciples. They have ample supplies: Jesus the bread maker. And they have a king: Jesus of Nazareth.

Why wait? The time has come. Israel will be restored. God’s people have heard God’s voice.

“King Jesus!” someone proclaims. And the crowd chimes in.

And don’t think for a minute that Christ didn’t hear their chant.

A chorus promising power intoxicates. No cross needed. No sacrifice required. An army of disciples at his fingertips. Power to change the world without having to die doing it.

Revenge would be sweet. *The one who took the head of John the Baptist is only a few miles away. I wonder if he has ever felt a cold blade on his neck.*

Yes, Jesus heard the voices. He heard the lurings. But he also heard someone else.

And when Jesus heard him, he sought him.

“Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.”

Jesus preferred to be alone with the true God rather than in a crowd with the

wrong people.

Logic didn't tell him to dismiss the crowds. Conventional wisdom didn't tell him to turn his back on a willing army. No, it wasn't a voice from without that Jesus heard. It was a voice from within.

The mark of a sheep is its ability to hear the Shepherd's voice.

"The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." The mark of a disciple is his or her ability to hear the Master's voice.

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." The world rams at your door; Jesus taps at your door. The voices scream for your allegiance; Jesus softly and tenderly requests it. The world promises flashy pleasure; Jesus promises a quiet dinner … with God. "I will come in and eat." Which voice do you hear?

Let me state something important. There is never a time during which Jesus is not speaking. Never. There is never a place in which Jesus is not present. Never. There is never a room so dark … a lounge so sensual … an office so sophisticated … that the ever-present, ever-pursuing, relentlessly tender Friend is not there, tapping gently on the doors of our hearts—waiting to be invited in.

Few hear his voice. Fewer still open the door.

But never interpret our numbness as his absence. For amidst the fleeting promises of pleasure is the timeless promise of his presence.

"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

"'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" There is no chorus so loud that the voice of God cannot be heard … if we will but listen.

That's true in this hotel room.

It took me a few minutes to find it, but I did. It wasn't as visible as the lounge placard or the movie advertisement. But it was there. It wasn't as fancy as the Mormon Bible or as attention-grabbing as the escort ads. But I'd give up those lies every time for the peace I've found in this treasure.

A Bible. A simple, hard-covered, Gideon-placed, King James Version Bible. It took me a few minutes to find it, but I did. And when I did, I opened it to one of my favorite voice passages:

A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.

Interesting. A day is coming when everyone will hear his voice. A day is coming when all the other voices will be silenced; his voice—and his voice only—will be heard.

Some will hear his voice for the very first time. It's not that he never spoke, it's just that they never listened. For these, God's voice will be the voice of a stranger. They will hear it once—and never hear it again. They will spend eternity fending off the voices they followed on earth.

But others will be called from their graves by a familiar voice. For they are sheep who know their shepherd. They are servants who opened the door when Jesus knocked.

Now the door will open again. Only this time, it won't be Jesus who walks into our house; it will be we, who walk into his.

**10 The Photo and the File**

Each june i put my calendar together for the coming year. June is the month of D-Day. I don't mean D-Day as in Normandy invasion. I mean D-Day as in decisions to be made.

This morning I began the process of decision. I opened the "Decision File" and began reading the speaking invitations. A church planter in Wyoming wonders if I could spend time with his church. A church camp in Washington invites me to speak to its campers. A missionary in India has read my books and asks, "If I can come up with the money, can you spend a week with us?"

Something happens as a person fields the invitations of others. He or she begins to feel important.

As I looked at the letters, it dawned on me how vital I was to the progress of

humanity.

I wondered how the earth stayed on its axis before I was born. I nodded my head in understanding at the letter that read, “You are the one for this meeting.” I put my hand under my shirt and rubbed the S on the red jersey—“Super Max.” I was feeling puffy and proud when I read the last letter. But as I put down the file, I noticed another request. One that didn’t make it into the folder. One that was lying on my desk.

It had no date, no signature, no deadline. It wasn’t a letter or a phone message. It was a photograph—a photograph so recent that it had no frame. It was a portrait of a mom and a dad encircled by three little girls. Our family portrait.

The positioning of the photo and the file struck me. There was something symbolic about the way I’d unintentionally placed the letters next to the family picture. The singular photo lying in the shadow of the stack of requests seemed to whisper a question that only I could answer:

“Max, who will win?”

There is only so much sand in the hourglass. Who gets it?

You know what I’m talking about, don’t you? Since you don’t stockpile your requests until June, your situation may not be as graphic as mine. But it’s every bit as real.

“The PTA needs a new treasurer. With your background and experience and talent and wisdom and love for kids and degree in accounting, YOU are the perfect one for the job!”

“There’s going to be some shuffling in the ranks. With the retirement of the branch manager, *somebody* will move up. The company is looking for a bright, young salesman—someone like you—who is willing to demonstrate his dedication to the organization by taking on some extra projects … and working some late hours.”

“I apologize that I have to ask you again, but you are such a good Sunday-school teacher. If you could only take one more quarter … ”

“I just lost my hygienist. Will you come back to work for me? I know you don’t

want to go back to work until your children start school. But it's only four hours a day and there's a day-care center just a few blocks from my office now. Wouldn't the extra money be nice?"

"Would I be willing to serve as chapter president? Well, to be honest, I was going to sit out this term because our youngest goes to college next fall. Yes, I realize this is a critical year for the organization.… Oh, no, I wouldn't want the club to falter.… Yes, we have made great progress over the last few months. It's just that … " It's tug-of-war, and you are the rope.

On one side are the requests for your time and energy. They call. They compliment.

They are valid and good. Great opportunities to do good things. If they were evil, it'd be easy to say no. But they aren't, so it's easy to rationalize.

On the other side are the loved ones in your world. They don't write you letters. They don't ask you to consult your calendar. They don't offer to pay your expenses. They don't use terms like "appointment," "engagement," or "do lunch." They don't want you for what you can do for them; they want you for who you are.

Clovis Chappell, a minister from a century back, used to tell the story of two paddleboats. They left Memphis about the same time, traveling down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. As they traveled side by side, sailors from one vessel made a few remarks about the snail's pace of the other.

Words were exchanged. Challenges were made. And the race began. Competition became vicious as the two boats roared through the Deep South.

One boat began falling behind. Not enough fuel. There had been plenty of coal for the trip, but not enough for a race. As the boat dropped back, an enterprising young sailor took some of the ship's cargo and tossed it into the ovens. When the sailors saw that the supplies burned as well as the coal, they fueled their boat with the material they had been assigned to transport. They ended up winning the race, but burned their cargo.

God has entrusted cargo to us, too: children, spouses, friends. Our job is to do our part in seeing that this cargo reaches its destination.

Yet when the program takes priority over people, people often suffer.

How much cargo do we sacrifice in order to achieve the number one slot? How many people never reach the destination because of the aggressiveness of a competitive captain?

A world of insight is hidden in four words in Matthew 14:22: “He dismissed the crowd.” This wasn’t just *any* crowd that Jesus dismissed.

These weren’t casually curious.

These weren’t coincidental bystanders.

This was a multitude with a mission. They had heard the disciples. They had left their homes. They had followed Jesus around the sea. They had heard him teach and had seen him heal. They had eaten the bread. And they were ready to make him king.

Surely Jesus will commandeer the crowd and focus their frenzy. Surely he will seize the chance to convert the thousands. Surely he will spend the night baptizing the willing followers. No one would turn down an opportunity to minister to thousands of people, right?

Jesus did.

“He dismissed the crowd.” Why? Read verse 23: “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.”

He said no to the important in order to say yes to the vital.

He said no to a good opportunity in order to say yes to a better opportunity. It wasn’t a selfish decision. It was a deliberate choice to honor priorities. If Jesus thought it necessary to say no to the demands of the crowds in order to pray, don’t you think you and I should, too?

“Blessed are the meek,” Jesus said. The word *meek* does not mean weak. It means focused. It is a word used to describe a domesticated stallion. Power under control.

Strength with a direction.

Blessed are those who are harnessed. Blessed are those who recognize their God-given responsibilities. Blessed are those who acknowledge that there is only one God and have quit applying for his position. Blessed are those who know what on earth they are on earth to do and set themselves about the business of doing it. Blessed are those who are able to “discern what is best.”

As I looked at the photo and the file, I decided to try something. I decided to make a list of what I would lose by saying no to my family one night. It wasn’t hard to do; I just made a list of what I would have missed by not being home with my family last night.

I could have been out of town this week. I had an invitation to be in the Midwest at a church. I turned it down. What if I hadn’t? If I had gone, I would have had the attention of a thousand people for an hour. I would have had the opportunity to speak about Jesus to some people who don’t know him. Is a Tuesday evening at home with three children and a spouse more important than preaching to an audience?

Read my list of what I would have missed. Then you decide.

I would have missed a trip to the swimming pool in which I saw Jenna climb onto her inner tube for the first time.

I would have missed fifteen minutes of bouncing up and down in the shallow end of the pool, with Andrea clinging to my neck singing the theme from “Sleeping Beauty.” I would have missed seeing Denalyn get sentimental as she unpacked a box of baby clothes.

I wouldn’t have gone on a walk with the girls during which Jenna found ten “special” rocks.

I wouldn’t have been there to hold Andrea when her finger got slammed in the door.

I wouldn’t have been there to answer Jenna’s question: “Daddy, what is a handicapped person?”

I would have missed seeing Andrea giggle as she took Jenna’s straw when Jenna’s back was turned.

I wouldn’t have heard Jenna tell the story of Jesus on the cross during our family devotional (when she assured us, “But he didn’t stay dead!”).

I wouldn’t have seen Andrea make a muscle with her arm and sing, “Our God is so BIIIIIIIG!”

What do you think? I know my vote. There are a hundred speakers who could have addressed that crowd, but my girls just have one daddy.

After I made my list, just for the fun of it I picked up the phone and called the church that had asked me to come and speak this week. The minister wasn’t in, but his secretary was. “Isn’t this the week of your seminar?” I asked.

“Oh, yes! It has been a wonderful success!”

They didn’t even miss me.

Now I’ve got a better idea what to do with my stack of requests.

## Storms of Doubt

## 11 Seeing God Through Shattered Glass

There is a window in your heart through which you can see God. Once upon a time that window was clear. Your view of God was crisp. You could see God as vividly as you could see a gentle valley or hillside. The glass was clean, the pane unbroken.

You knew God. You knew how he worked. You knew what he wanted you to do. No surprises. Nothing unexpected. You knew that God had a will, and you continually discovered what it was.

Then, suddenly, the window cracked. A pebble broke the window. A pebble of pain.

Perhaps the stone struck when you were a child and a parent left home—forever.

Maybe the rock hit in adolescence when your heart was broken. Maybe you made it into adulthood before the window was cracked. But then the pebble

came.

Was it a phone call? “We have your daughter at the station. You’d better come down.”

Was it a letter on the kitchen table? “I’ve left. Don’t try to reach me. Don’t try to call me. It’s over. I just don’t love you anymore.”

Was it a diagnosis from the doctor? “I’m afraid our news is not very good.” Was it a telegram? “We regret to inform you that your son is missing in action.” Whatever the pebble’s form, the result was the same—a shattered window. The pebble missiled into the pane and shattered it. The crash echoed down the halls of your heart. Cracks shot out from the point of impact, creating a spider web of fragmented pieces.

And suddenly God was not so easy to see. The view that had been so crisp had changed. You turned to see God, and his figure was distorted. It was hard to see him through the pain. It was hard to see him through the fragments of hurt.

You were puzzled. God wouldn’t allow something like this to happen, would he?

Tragedy and travesty weren’t on the agenda of the One you had seen, were they? Had you been fooled? Had you been blind?

The moment the pebble struck, the glass became a reference point for you. From then on, there was life before the pain and life after the pain. Before your pain, the view was clear; God seemed so near. After your pain, well, he was harder to see. He seemed a bit distant … harder to perceive. Your pain distorted the view —not eclipsed it, but distorted it.

Maybe these words don’t describe your situation. There are some people who never have to redefine or refocus their view of God. Most of us do.

Most of us know what it means to feel disappointed by God.

Most of us have a way of completing this sentence: “If God is God, then … ” Call it an agenda, a divine job description. Each of us has an unspoken, yet definitive, expectation of what God should do. “If God is God, then … ”

• There will be no financial collapse in my family.

• My children will never be buried before me.

• People will treat me fairly.

• This church will never divide.

• My prayer will be answered.

These are not articulated criteria. They are not written down or notarized. But they are real. They define the expectations we have of God. And when pain comes into our world—when the careening pebble splinters the window of our hearts—these expectations go unmet and doubts may begin to surface.

We look for God, but can't find him. Fragmented glass hinders our vision. He is enlarged through this piece and reduced through that one. Lines jigsaw their way across his face. Large sections of shattered glass opaque the view.

And now you aren't quite sure what you see.

The disciples weren't sure what they saw, either.

Jesus failed to meet their expectations. The day Jesus fed the five thousand men he didn't do what they wanted him to do.

The Twelve returned from their mission followed by an army. They finished their training. They recruited the soldiers. They were ready for battle. They expected Jesus to let the crowds crown him as king and attack the city of Herod. They expected battle plans… strategies … a new era for Israel.

What did they get?

Just the opposite.

Instead of weapons, they got oars. Rather than being sent to fight, they were sent to float. The crowds were sent away. Jesus walked away. And they were left on the water with a storm brewing in the sky.

What kind of Messiah would do this?

Note carefully the sequence of the stormy evening as Matthew records it:

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. *When evening came* [emphasis mine], he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

Matthew is specific about the order of events. Jesus sent the disciples to the boat.

Then he dismissed the crowd and ascended a mountainside. It was evening, probably around 6:00 p.m. The storm struck immediately. The sun had scarcely set before typhoon-like winds began to roar.

Note that Jesus sent the disciples out into the storm *alone.* Even as he was ascending the mountainside, he could feel and hear the gale's force. Jesus was not ignorant of the storm. He was aware that a torrent was coming that would carpet-bomb the sea's surface.

But he didn't turn around. The disciples were left to face the storm … alone.

The greatest storm that night was not in the sky; it was in the disciples' hearts. The greatest fear was not from seeing the storm-driven waves; it came from seeing the back of their leader as he left them to face the night with only questions as companions.

It was this fury that the disciples were facing that night. Imagine the incredible strain of bouncing from wave to wave in a tiny fishing vessel. One hour would weary you. Two hours would exhaust you.

*Surely Jesus will help us,* they thought. They'd seen him still storms like this before.

On this same sea, they had awakened him during a storm, and he had commanded the skies to be silent. They'd seen him quiet the wind and soothe the waves. *Surely he will come off the mountain.*

But he doesn't. Their arms begin to ache from rowing. Still no sign of Jesus. Three hours. Four hours. The winds rage. The boat bounces. Still no Jesus. Midnight comes.

Their eyes search for God—in vain.

By now the disciples have been on the sea for as long as six hours.

All this time they have fought the storm and sought the Master. And, so far, the storm is winning. And the Master is nowhere to be found.

“Where is he?” cried one.

“Has he forgotten us?” yelled another.

“He feeds thousands of strangers and yet leaves us to die?” muttered a third.

The Gospel of Mark adds compelling insight into the disciples’ attitude. “They had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” What does Mark mean? Simply this. The disciples were mad. They began the evening in a huff. Their hearts were hardened toward Jesus because he fed the multitude. Their preference, remember, had been to “send the crowds away.” And Jesus had told them to feed the people. But they wouldn’t try. They said it couldn’t be done. They told Jesus to let the people take care of themselves.

Also keep in mind that the disciples had just spent some time on center stage. They’d tasted stardom. They were celebrities. They had rallied crowds. They had recruited an army. They were, no doubt, pretty proud of themselves. With chests a bit puffy and heads a bit swollen, they’d told Jesus, “Just send them away.” Jesus didn’t. Instead, he chose to bypass the reluctant disciples and use the faith of an anonymous boy. What the disciples said couldn’t be done was done—in spite of them, not through them.

They pouted. They sulked. Rather than being amazed at the miracle, they became mad at the Master. After all, they had felt foolish passing out the very bread they said could not be made. Add to that Jesus’ command to go to the boat when they wanted to go to battle, and it’s easier to understand why these guys are burning!

“Now what is Jesus up to, leaving us out on the sea on a night like this?” It’s 1:00 a.m., no Jesus.

It’s 2:00 a.m., no Jesus.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John have seen storms like this. They are fishermen; the sea is their life. They know the havoc the gale-force winds can wreak.

They've seen the splintered hulls float to shore. They've attended the funerals. They know, better than anyone, that this night could be their last. "Why doesn't he come?" they sputter.

Finally, he does. "During the fourth watch of the night [3:00 to 6:00 a.m.] Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake."

Jesus came. He finally came. But between verse 24—being buffeted by waves—and verse 25—when Jesus appeared—a thousand questions are asked.

Questions you have probably asked, too. Perhaps you know the angst of being suspended between verses 24 and 25. Maybe you're riding a storm, searching the coastline for a light, a glimmer of hope. You know that Jesus knows what you are going through. You know that he's aware of your storm. But as hard as you look to find him, you can't see him. Maybe your heart, like the disciples' hearts, has been hardened by unmet expectations. Your pleadings for help are salted with angry questions.

The first section of this book spoke of stress; the second is about storms. Stress attacks your nerves. Storms attack your faith. Stress interrupts. Storms destroy. Stress comes like a siren. Storms come like a missile. Stress clouds the day. Storms usher in the night.

The question of stress is, *"How can I cope?"* The question of storms is, "*Where* is God and *why* would he do this?"

The second section of this book is for you if the pebble of pain has struck the window of your heart, if you've known the horror of looking for God's face and seeing only his back as he ascends a mountainside.

In the following pages, you will discover hopeful chronicles to help you deal with your doubts. Let me introduce you to a few friends who learned to see through shattered glass.

• An entrepreneur, stripped of treasures, who found one treasure that no one could take.

• A father who learned of trust during a six-hour drive with three children.

• A mother superior in New Mexico who discovered that prayer—her last resort

—was her best resort.

• A woodsman who taught a village the virtue of patience.

• God's son—dog-tired and heartsore—who found strength through heaven's friends.

Some stories are fiction, some are fact. Some are legendary, others are biblical. Some are humorous, others are serious. But all have a message for those who know the anxiety of searching for God in a storm.

The message? When you can't see him, trust him. The figure you see is not a ghost.

The voice you hear is not the wind.

Jesus is closer than you've ever dreamed.

**12 Two Fathers, Two Feasts**

I Drove the family to Grandma's last night for Thanksgiving. Three hours into the six-hour trip, I realized that I was in a theology lab.

A day with a car full of kids will teach you a lot about God. Transporting a family from one city to another is closely akin to God transporting us from our home to his. And some of life's stormiest hours occur when the passenger and the Driver disagree on the destination.

A journey is a journey, whether the destination be the Thanksgiving table or the heavenly one. Both demand patience, a good sense of direction, and a driver who knows that the feast at the end of the trip is worth the hassles in the midst of the trip.

The fact that my pilgrims were all under the age of seven only enriched my learning experience.

As minutes rolled into hours and our car rolled through the hills, I began to realize that what I was saying to my kids had a familiar ring. I had heard it before—from God.

All of a sudden, the car became a classroom. I realized that I was doing for a few hours what God has done for centuries: encouraging travelers who'd rather rest than ride.

I shared the idea with Denalyn. We began to discover similarities between the two journeys. Here are a few we noted.

*In order to reach the destination, we have to say no to some requests.*

Can you imagine the outcome if a parent honored each request of each child during a trip? We'd inch our bloated bellies from one ice-cream store to the next. Our priority would be popcorn and our itinerary would read like a fast-food menu. "Go to the Cherry Malt and make a right. Head north until you find the Chili Cheeseburger. Stay north for 1,300 calories and bear left at the Giant Pizza. When you see the two-for-one Chili Dog Special, take the Pepto-Bismol Turnpike east for five convenience stores. At the sixth toilet … "

Can you imagine the chaos if a parent indulged every indulgence?

Can you imagine the chaos if God indulged each of ours?

*No* is a necessary word to take on a trip. Destination has to reign over Dairy Deluxe Ice Cream Sundae.

"For God has not *destined* us [emphasis mine] to the terrors of judgement, but to the full attainment of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Note God's destiny for your life. Salvation.

God's overarching desire is that you reach that destiny. His itinerary includes stops that encourage your journey. He frowns on stops that deter you. When his sovereign plan and your earthly plan collide, a decision must be made. Who's in charge of this journey?

If God must choose between your earthly satisfaction and your heavenly salvation, which do you hope he chooses?

Me, too.

When I'm in the driver's seat as the father of my children, I remember that I'm in charge. But when I'm in the passenger's seat as a child of my Father, I forget

that he's in charge. I forget that God is more concerned with my destiny than my belly (although my belly hasn't done too badly). And I complain when he says no.

The requests my children made last night on the road to Grandma's weren't evil.

They weren't unfair. They weren't rebellious. In fact, we had a couple of cones and Cokes. But most of the requests were unnecessary.

My four-year-old daughter would argue that fact. From her viewpoint, another soft drink is indispensable to her happiness. I know otherwise, so I say no.

A forty-year-old adult would argue that fact. From his standpoint, a new boss is indispensable to his happiness. God knows otherwise and says no.

A thirty-year-old woman would argue that fact. From her standpoint, *that* man with *that* job and *that* name is exactly who she needs to be happy. Her Father, who is more concerned that she arrive at his City than at the altar, says, "Wait a few miles. There's a better option down the road."

"Wait!" she protests. "How long do I have to wait?" Which takes us to a second similarity between the two journeys.

*Children have no concept of minutes or miles.*

"We'll be there in three hours," I said.

"How long is three hours?" Jenna asked. (How do you explain time to a child who can't tell time?)

"Well, it's about as long as three Sesame Streets," I ventured.

The children groaned in unison. "Three Sesame Streets?! That's forever!" And to them, it is.

And to us, it seems that way, too.

He who "lives forever" has placed himself at the head of a band of pilgrims who mutter, "How long, O Lord? How long?"

“How long must I endure this sickness?”

“How long must I endure this spouse?”

“How long must I endure this paycheck?”

Do you really want God to answer? He could, you know. He could answer in terms of the here and now with time increments we know. “Two more years on the illness.” “The rest of your life in the marriage.” “Ten more years for the bills.” But he seldom does that. He usually opts to measure the *here and now* against the *there and then.* And when you compare *this* life to *that* life, this life ain’t long.

Our days on earth are like a shadow.

Each man’s life is but a breath.

You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.

“It’s a short journey,” I offer to the children. “We’re almost there.” I know. I’ve been there before. I’ve driven this road. I’ve covered this territory. For me, it’s no challenge. Ah, but for the children, it’s eternal.

So I try another approach. “Just think how good it will be,” I depict. “Turkey, dressing, pie … I promise you, when you get there, the trip will have been worth it.” But they still groan.

Which takes us to the third similarity.

*Children can’t envision the reward.*

For me, six hours on the road is a small price to pay for my mom’s strawberry cake. I don’t mind the drive because I know the reward. I have three decades of Thanksgivings under my belt, literally. As I drive, I can taste the turkey. Hear the dinner-table laughter.

Smell the smoke from the fireplace.

I can endure the journey because I know the destiny.

My daughters have forgotten the destiny. After all, they are young. Children easily forget. Besides, the road is strange, and the dark night has come. They can't see where we're going. It's my job, as their father, to guide them.

I try to help them see what they can't see.

I tell them how we'll feed the ducks at the lake. How we'll play on the swings. How they can spend the night with their cousins. We speak of sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags and staying up late since there is no school.

And it seems to work. Their grumbling decreases as their vision clears—as their destiny unfolds.

Perhaps that's how the apostle Paul stayed motivated. He had a clear vision of the reward.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

It's not easy to get three girls under the age of seven to see a city they can't see. But it's necessary.

It's not easy for us to see a City we've never seen, either, especially when the road is bumpy … the hour is late … and companions are wanting to cancel the trip and take up residence in a motel. It's not easy to fix our eyes on what is unseen. But it's necessary.

One line in the 2 Corinthians passage you just read makes me smile: "our light and momentary troubles."

I wouldn't have called them that if I were Paul. Read what he called *light and momentary,* and I think you'll agree:

• Imprisoned.

• Beaten with a whip five times.

• Faced death.

• Beaten with rods three times.

• Stoned once.

• Shipwrecked three times.

• Stranded in the open sea.

• Left homeless.

• In constant danger.

• Hungry and thirsty.

*Long and trying ordeals,* perhaps. *Arduous and deadly afflictions,* OK. But *light and momentary troubles?* How could Paul describe endless trials with that phrase?

He tells us. He could see "an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." Can I speak candidly for a few lines?

For some of you, the journey has been long. Very long and stormy. In no way do I wish to minimize the difficulties that you have had to face along the way. Some of you have shouldered burdens that few of us could ever carry. You have bid farewell to life-long partners. You have been robbed of life-long dreams. You have been given bodies that can't sustain your spirit. You have spouses who can't tolerate your faith. You have bills that outnumber the paychecks and challenges that outweigh the strength.

And you are tired.

It's hard for you to see the City in the midst of the storms. The desire to pull over to the side of the road and get out entices you. You want to go on, but some days the road seems so long.

Let me encourage you with one final parallel between your life's journey and the one our family took last night.

*It's worth it.*

As I write, the Thanksgiving meal is over. My legs are propped up on the hearth. My tablet is on my lap.

I have every intention of dozing off as soon as I finish this chapter.

The turkey has been attacked. The giblet gravy has been gobbled. The table is clear.

The kids are napping. And the family is content.

As we sat around the table today, no one spoke of the long trip to get here. No one mentioned the requests I didn't honor. No one grumbled about my foot being on the accelerator when their hearts were focused on the banana splits. No one complained about the late hour of arrival.

Yesterday's challenges were lost in today's joy.

That's what Paul meant. God never said that the journey would be easy, but he did say that the arrival would be worthwhile.

Remember this: God may not do what you want, but he will do what is right … and best. He's the Father of forward motion. Trust him. He will get you home. And the trials of the trip will be lost in the joys of the feast.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll close my eyes. I'm a bit tired from the journey, and it feels good to rest.

**13 Doubtstorms**

There are snowstorms. There are hailstorms. There are rainstorms. And there are doubtstorms.

Every so often a doubtstorm rolls into my life, bringing with it a flurry of questions and gale-force winds of fear. And, soon after it comes, a light shines through it.

Sometimes the storm comes after the evening news. Some nights I wonder why I watch it. Some nights it's just too much. From the steps of the Supreme Court to

the steppes of South Africa, the news is usually gloomy … thirty minutes of bite-sized tragedies. A handsome man in a nice suit with a warm voice gives bad news. They call him the anchorman. Good title. One needs an anchor in today's tempestuous waters.

Sometimes I wonder, *How can our world get so chaotic?*

Sometimes the storm comes when I'm at work. Story after story of homes that won't heal and hearts that won't melt. Always more hunger than food. More needs than money.

More questions than answers. On Sundays I stand before a church with a three-point outline in my hand, thirty minutes on the clock, and a prayer on my lips. I do my best to say something that will convince a stranger that an unseen God still hears.

And I sometimes wonder why so many hearts have to hurt.

Do you ever get doubtstorms? Some of you don't, I know. I've talked to you. Some of you have a "Davidish" optimism that defies any Goliath. I used to think that you were naive at best and phony at worst.

I don't think that anymore.

I think you are gifted. You are gifted with faith. You can see the rainbow before the clouds part. If you have this gift, then skip this chapter. I won't say anything you need to hear.

But others of you wonder …

You wonder what others know that you don't. You wonder if you are blind or if they are. You wonder why some proclaim "Eureka" before the gold is found. You wonder why some shout "Land ho" before the fog has cleared. You wonder how some people believe so confidently while you believe so reluctantly.

As a result, you are a bit uncomfortable on the padded pew of blind belief. Your Bible hero is Thomas. Your middle name is Caution. Your queries are the bane of every Sunday school teacher.

"If God is so good, why do I sometimes feel so bad?"

“If his message is so clear, why do I get so confused?”

“If the Father is in control, why do good people have gut-wrenching problems?” You wonder if it is a blessing or a curse to have a mind that never rests. But you would rather be a cynic than a hypocrite, so you continue to pray with one eye open and wonder:

• about starving children

• about the power of prayer

• about the depths of grace

• about Christians in cancer wards

• about who you are to ask such questions anyway.

Tough questions. Throw-in-the-towel questions. Questions the disciples must have asked in the storm.

All they could see were black skies as they bounced in the battered boat. Swirling clouds. Wind-driven white caps. Pessimism that buried the coastline. Gloom that swamped the bow. What could have been a pleasant trip became a white-knuckled ride through a sea of fear.

Their question—What hope do we have of surviving a stormy night?

My question—Where is God when his world is stormy?

Doubtstorms: turbulent days when the enemy is too big, the task too great, the future too bleak, and the answers too few.

Every so often a storm will come, and I’ll look up into the blackening sky and say,

“God, a little light, please?”

The light came for the disciples. A figure came to them walking on the water. It wasn’t what they expected. Perhaps they were looking for angels to descend or heaven to open. Maybe they were listening for a divine proclamation to still the

storm. We don't know what they were looking for. But one thing is for sure, they weren't looking for Jesus to come walking on the water.

"'It's a ghost,' they said and cried out in fear" (Matt. 14:26).

And since Jesus came in a way they didn't expect, they almost missed seeing the answer to their prayers.

And unless we look and listen closely, we risk making the same mistake. God's lights in our dark nights are as numerous as the stars, if only we'll look for them.

Can I share a few lights with you that have illuminated my world recently?

A friend and I sat in front of my house in his car and talked about his dilemma. His chief client pulled out on him, leaving him big bills and few solutions. What the client did wasn't right, but he did it anyway. The client's company was big and my friend's was small, and there wasn't a lot he could do. My friend was left with a den of hungry lions wanting six figures' worth of satisfaction.

"I called my uncle and told him what had happened. I told him I was thinking of filing for bankruptcy."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He didn't say anything," my friend responded. "After he was silent for a long time, I said it for him. 'We don't do it like that, do we?'"

"'No, we don't,' he told me. So I'll pay the bills. If I have to sell my house, I'll pay my bills."

I was encouraged. Somebody still believed that if he did what was right, God would do what was best. There was still some we-don't-do-it-like-that faith in the world. The sky began to clear.

Light number two came from a cancer ward.

"We will celebrate forty-four years tomorrow," Jack said, feeding his wife.

She was bald. Her eyes were sunken, and her speech was slurred. She looked straight ahead, only opening her mouth when he brought the fork near. He wiped

her cheek. He wiped his brow.

“She has been sick for five years,” he told me. “She can’t walk. She can’t take care of herself. She can’t even feed herself, but I love her. And,” he spoke louder so she could hear, “we are going to beat this thing, aren’t we, Honey?” He fed her a few bites and spoke again, “We don’t have insurance. When I could afford it, I thought I wouldn’t need it. Now I owe this hospital more than $50,000.” He was quiet for a few moments as he gave her a drink. Then he continued. “But they don’t pester me. They know I can’t pay, but they admitted us with no questions asked. The doctors treat us like we are their best-paying patients. Who would’ve imagined such kindness?”

I had to agree with him. Who would’ve imagined such kindness? In a thorny world of high-tech, expensive, often criticized health care, it was reassuring to find professionals who would serve two who had nothing to give in return.

Jack thanked me for coming, and I thanked God that once again a sinew of light reminded me of the sun behind the clouds.

Then, a few days later, another light.

Larry Brown is the coach of the San Antonio Spurs, the local professional basketball team. I don’t know him personally (although rumor has it that he wants me to sign a multi-year contract and play point guard for the team … nice fantasy).

Coach Brown recently spent an afternoon at a local men’s store, signing autographs.

He was scheduled to spend two hours, but ended up spending three.

Pencil-and-pad-toting kids besieged the place, asking him questions and shaking his hand.

When he was finally able to slip out, he climbed into his car, only to notice a touching sight. A late-arriving youngster pedaled up, jumped off his bike, and ran to the window to see if the coach was still in the store. When he saw he wasn’t, he turned slowly and sadly, walked over to his bike, and began to ride off.

Coach Brown turned off the ignition, climbed out of the car, and walked over to the boy. They chatted a few minutes, went next door to a drugstore, sat down at a table, and had a soft drink.

No reporters were near. No cameras were on. As far as these two knew, no one knew.

I'm sure Larry Brown had other things to do that afternoon. No doubt he had other appointments to keep. But it's doubtful that anything he might have done that afternoon was more important than what he did.

In a world of big-bucked, high-glossed professional sports, it did me good to hear of one coach who is still a coach at heart. Hearing what he did was enough to blow away any lingering clouds of doubt and to leave me warmed by God's light … his gentle light.

Gentle lights. God's solutions for doubtstorms. Gold-flecked glows that amber hope into blackness. Not thunderbolts. Not explosions of light. Just gentle lights. A businessman choosing honesty. A hospital choosing compassion. A celebrity choosing kindness.

Visible evidence of the invisible hand.

Soft reminders that optimism is not just for fools.

Funny. None of the events were "religious." None of the encounters occurred in a ceremony or a church service. None will make the six o'clock news.

But such is the case with gentle lights.

When the disciples saw Jesus in the middle of their stormy night, they called him a ghost. A phantom. A hallucination. To them, the glow was anything but God.

When we see gentle lights on the horizon, we often have the same reaction. We dismiss occasional kindness as apparitions, accidents, or anomalies. Anything but God.

"When Jesus comes," the disciples in the boat may have thought, "he'll split the sky.

The sea will be calm. The clouds will disperse."

"When God comes," we doubters think, "all pain will flee. Life will be tranquil. No questions will remain."

And because we look for the bonfire, we miss the candle. Because we listen for the shout, we miss the whisper.

But it is in burnished candles that God comes, and through whispered promises he speaks: "When you doubt, look around; I am closer than you think."

**14 The Miracle of the Carpenter**

It's no accident that new mexico is called the "Land of Enchantment." Sprawling deserts spotted with sage. Purple mountains wreathed with clouds. Adobe homes hidden on hillsides. Majestic pines. Endless artifacts. A cloverleaf of cultures from the conquistador to the Comanche to the cowboy. New Mexico enchants.

And in this land of enchantment, there is a chapel of wonder.

A block south of the La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, on the corner of Water Street and Old Santa Fe Trail, you will find Loretto Chapel. As you step through its iron gate, you enter more than a chapel courtyard. You enter another era. Pause for a moment under the sprawling branches of the ancient trees. Imagine what it was like when the Mexican carpenters completed the chapel in 1878.

Can you see the settlers stomping through the muddy streets? Can you hear the donkeys braying? The wagon wheels groaning? And can you see the early morning sun spotlighting this gothic chapel—so simple, so splendid—as it sits against the backdrop of the desert hills?

Loretto Chapel took five years to complete. Modeled after the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, its delicate sanctuary contains an altar, a rose window, and a choir loft.

The choir loft is the reason for wonder.

Were you to stand in the newly built chapel in 1878, you might see the Sisters of Loretto looking forlornly at the balcony. Everything else was complete: the doors had been hung, the pews had been placed, the floor had been laid. Everything was finished.

Even the choir loft. Except for one thing. No stairs.

The chapel was too small to accommodate a conventional stairway. The best builders and designers in the region shook their heads when consulted. “Impossible,” they murmured. There simply wasn’t enough room. A ladder would serve the purpose, but mar the ambiance.

The Sisters of Loretto, whose determination had led them from Kentucky to Santa Fe, now faced a challenge greater than their journey: a stairway that couldn’t be built.

What they had dreamed of and what they could do were separated by fifteen impossible feet.

So what did they do? The only thing they could do. They ascended the mountain. Not the high mountains near Santa Fe. No, they climbed even higher. They climbed the same mountain that Jesus climbed 1,800 years earlier in Bethsaida. They climbed the mountain of prayer.

“He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray.”

Jesus faced an impossible task. More than five thousand people were ready to fight a battle he had not come to fight. How could he show them that he didn’t come to be a king, but to be a sacrifice? How could he take their eyes off an earthly kingdom so that they would see the spiritual one? How could they see the eternal when they only had eyes for the temporal?

What Jesus dreamed of doing and what he seemed able to do were separated by an impossible gulf. So Jesus prayed.

We don’t know what he prayed about. But I have my guesses:

• He prayed that eyes blinded by power could see God’s truth.

• He prayed that disciples dizzied by success could endure failure.

• He prayed that leaders longing for power would follow him to a cross.

• He prayed that people desiring bread for the body would hunger for bread for the soul.

He prayed for the impossible to happen.

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he didn't ask for anything. Maybe he just stood quietly in the presence of Presence and basked in the Majesty. Perhaps he placed his war-weary self before the throne and rested.

Maybe he lifted his head out of the confusion of earth long enough to hear the solution of heaven. Perhaps he was reminded that hard hearts don't faze the Father. That problem people don't perturb the Eternal One.

We don't know what he did or what he said. But we do know the result. The hill became a steppingstone; the storm became a path. And the disciples saw Jesus as they had never seen him before.

During the storm, Jesus prayed. The sky darkened. The winds howled. Yet he prayed.

The people grumbled. The disciples doubted. Yet he prayed. When forced to choose between the muscles of men and the mountain of prayer, he prayed.

Jesus did not try to do it by himself. Why should you?

There are crevasses in your life that you cannot cross alone. There are hearts in your world that you cannot change without help. There are mountains that you can-not climb until you climb His mountain.

Climb it. You will be amazed.

The Sisters of Loretto were.

As the story goes, the nuns prayed for nine days. On the last day of the novena, a Mexican carpenter with a beard and a wind-burned face appeared at the convent. He explained that he had heard they needed a stairway to a chapel loft. He thought he could help.

The mother superior had nothing to lose, so she gave him permission.

He went to work with crude tools, painstaking patience, and uncanny skill. For eight months he worked.

One morning the Sisters of Loretto entered the chapel to find their prayers had been answered. A masterpiece of carpentry spiraled from the floor to the loft. Two complete three-hundred-sixty-degree turns. Thirty-three steps held together with wooden pegs and no central support. The wood is said to be a variety of hard fir, one nonexistent in New Mexico!

When the sisters turned to thank the craftsman, he was gone. He was never seen again. He never asked for money. He never asked for praise. He was a simple carpenter who did what no one else could do so singers could enter a choir loft and sing.

See the stairway for yourself, if you like. Journey into the land of Enchantment. Step into this chapel of amazement and witness the fruit of prayer.

Or, if you prefer, talk to the Master Carpenter yourself. He has already performed one impossible feat in your world. He, like the Santa Fe carpenter, built a stairway no one else could build. He, like the nameless craftsman, used material from another place. He, like the visitor to Loretto, came to span the gap between where you are and where you long to be.

Each year of his life is a step. Thirty-three paces. Each step of the stair is an answered prayer. He built it so you can climb it.

And sing.

**15 The Woodcutter's Wisdom**

Would you buy a house if you were only allowed to see one of its rooms? Would you purchase a car if you were permitted to see only its tires and a taillight? Would you pass judgment on a book after reading only one paragraph?

Nor would I.

Good judgment requires a broad picture. Not only is that true in purchasing houses, cars, and books, it's true in evaluating life. One failure doesn't make a person a failure; one achievement doesn't make a person a success.

"The end of the matter is better than its beginning," penned the sage.

"Be … patient in affliction," echoed the apostle Paul.

“Don’t judge a phrase by one word,” stated the woodcutter.

The woodcutter? Oh, you may not know him. Let me present him to you.

I met him in Brazil. He was introduced to me by a friend who knew that I needed patience. Denalyn and I were six months into a five-year stint in Brazil, and I was frustrated. My fascination with Rio de Janeiro had turned into exasperation with words I couldn’t speak and a culture I didn’t understand.

“Tenha paciência,” Maria would tell me. “Just be patient.” She was my Portuguese instructor. But, more than that, she was a calm voice in a noisy storm. With maternal persistence, she corrected my pronunciation and helped me learn to love her homeland.

Once, in the midst of a frustrating week of trying to get our goods out of customs (which eventually took three months), she gave me this story as a homework assignment.

It helped my attitude far more than it helped my Portuguese.

It’s a simple fable. Yet for those of us who try to pass judgment on life with only one day’s evidence, the message is profound. I’ve done nothing to embellish it; I’ve only translated it. I pray that it will remind you, as it did me, that patience is the greater courage.

Once there was an old man who lived in a tiny village. Although poor, he was envied by all, for he owned a beautiful white horse. Even the king coveted his treasure. A horse like this had never been seen before—such was its splendor, its majesty, its strength.

People offered fabulous prices for the steed, but the old man always refused. “This horse is not a horse to me,” he would tell them. “It is a person. How could you sell a person? He is a friend, not a possession. How could you sell a friend?” The man was poor and the temptation was great. But he never sold the horse.

One morning he found that the horse was not in the stable. All the village came to see him. “You old fool,” they scoffed, “we told you that someone would steal your horse. We warned you that you would be robbed. You are so poor. How could you ever hope to protect such a valuable animal? It would have been better to have sold him. You could have gotten whatever price you wanted. No amount

would have been too high. Now the horse is gone, and you've been cursed with misfortune." The old man responded, "Don't speak too quickly. Say only that the horse is not in the stable. That is all we know; the rest is judgment. If I've been cursed or not, how can you know? How can you judge?"

The people contested, "Don't make us out to be fools! We may not be philosophers, but great philosophy is not needed. The simple fact that your horse is gone is a curse." The old man spoke again. "All I know is that the stable is empty, and the horse is gone. The rest I don't know. Whether it be a curse or a blessing, I can't say. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?" The people of the village laughed. They thought that the man was crazy. They had always thought he was a fool; if he wasn't, he would have sold the horse and lived off the money. But instead, he was a poor woodcutter, an old man still cutting firewood and dragging it out of the forest and selling it. He lived hand to mouth in the misery of poverty. Now he had proven that he was, indeed, a fool.

After fifteen days, the horse returned. He hadn't been stolen; he had run away into the forest. Not only had he returned, he had brought a dozen wild horses with him. Once again the village people gathered around the woodcutter and spoke. "Old man, you were right and we were wrong. What we thought was a curse was a blessing. Please forgive us."

The man responded, "Once again, you go too far. Say only that the horse is back.

State only that a dozen horses returned with him, but don't judge. How do you know if this is a blessing or not? You see only a fragment. Unless you know the whole story, how can you judge? You read only one page of a book. Can you judge the whole book? You read only one word of a phrase. Can you understand the entire phrase?

"Life is so vast, yet you judge all of life with one page or one word. All you have is a fragment! Don't say that this is a blessing. No one knows. I am content with what I know. I am not perturbed by what I don't."

"Maybe the old man is right," they said to one another. So they said little. But down deep, they knew he was wrong. They knew it was a blessing. Twelve wild horses had returned with one horse. With a little bit of work, the animals could be broken and trained and sold for much money.

The old man had a son, an only son. The young man began to break the wild horses.

After a few days, he fell from one of the horses and broke both legs. Once again the villagers gathered around the old man and cast their judgments.

“You were right,” they said. “You proved you were right. The dozen horses were not a blessing. They were a curse. Your only son has broken his legs, and now in your old age you have no one to help you. Now you are poorer than ever.” The old man spoke again. “You people are obsessed with judging. Don’t go so far.

Say only that my son broke his legs. Who knows if it is a blessing or a curse? No one knows. We only have a fragment. Life comes in fragments.” It so happened that a few weeks later the country engaged in war against a neighboring country. All the young men of the village were required to join the army.

Only the son of the old man was excluded, because he was injured. Once again the people gathered around the old man, crying and screaming because their sons had been taken. There was little chance that they would return. The enemy was strong, and the war would be a losing struggle. They would never see their sons again.

“You were right, old man,” they wept. “God knows you were right. This proves it.

Your son's accident was a blessing. His legs may be broken, but at least he is with you.

Our sons are gone forever."

The old man spoke again. "It is impossible to talk with you. You always draw conclusions. No one knows. Say only this: Your sons had to go to war, and mine did not.

No one knows if it is a blessing or a curse. No one is wise enough to know. Only God knows."

The old man was right. We only have a fragment. Life's mishaps and horrors are only a page out of a grand book. We must be slow about drawing conclusions. We must reserve judgment on life's storms until we know the whole story.

I don't know where the woodcutter learned his patience. Perhaps from another woodcutter in Galilee. For it was the Carpenter who said it best:

"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." He should know. He is the Author of our story. And he has already written the final chapter.

**16 Laws of the Lighthouse**

The first of the year is known for three things: black-eyed peas, bowl games, and lists. Some don't eat black-eyed peas. Others hate football. But everybody likes lists.

Lists are reassuring. They comfort us. They suggest that the crazy, zooming, blooming chaos of the universe can be mastered and tamed within the cage of a tidy column. To list is to understand, solve, and even control. For that reason we can't resist the urge, at the end of the year, to spew out lists like Washington, D.C. spews out documents.

We list the best movies … the best books … the worst dressed … the most used …

the least popular … the most mysterious … the highest paid. We salute the good. We satire the bad. And we sum up the year on lists—"end-list" lists.

Although New Year's Day ranks at the top of the list of list-producing days, the rest of the year is by no means "list-less."

• Your grocery list makes a trip to the market manageable.

• Your calendar probably has a "to do" space, where you organize and number things you'd like to do but probably won't.

• Your syllabus tells you which books to buy.

• Your itinerary tells you which plane to take.

• Your telephone book tells you which numbers to dial.

The Bible certainly has its share of lists. Moses brought one down from the mountain.

Noah might have used one as he loaded the ark. Jesus gave a list of principles in the Sermon on the Mount. (Paul gave his version in Romans 12.) Matthew and Luke listed the genealogies of Jesus. John listed the splendors of heaven.

There are lists of the gifts of the Spirit. Lists of good fruit and bad. Lists of salutations and greetings. Even the disciples' boat got into the action as it listed in the stormy Sea of Galilee. (If you smiled at that, then I've got a list of puns you'd enjoy.) But the greatest day of lists is still New Year's Day. And the number one list is the list I call the Laws of the Lighthouse.

The Laws of the Lighthouse list contains immutable, immovable truths. Candidates for this inventory only qualify if they have lighthouse characteristics:

• They warn you of potential danger.

• They signal safe harbor.

• They are stronger than the storm.

• They shine brightest in the fog.

The Laws of the Lighthouse contain more than good ideas, personal preferences, and honest opinions. They are God-given, time-tested truths that define the way

you should navigate your life. Observe them and enjoy secure passage. Ignore them and crash against the ragged rocks of reality.

In *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings,* the magazine of the Naval Institute, Frank Koch illustrates the importance of obeying the Laws of the Lighthouse.

Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.”

“Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain called out.

The lookout replied, “Steady, Captain,” which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, “Signal that ship: ‘We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.’”

Back came the signal, “Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees.” The captain said, “Send: ‘I’m a captain, change course twenty degrees.’”

“I’m a seaman second-class,” came the reply. “You had better change course twenty degrees.”

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, “Send: ‘I’m a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.’”

Back came the flashing light, “I’m a lighthouse.”

We changed course.

Smart move. The wise captain shifts the direction of his craft according to the signal of the lighthouse. A wise person does the same.

Herewith, then, are the lights I look for and the signals I heed:

• Love God more than you fear hell.

• Once a week, let a child take you on a walk.

• Make major decisions in a cemetery.

• When no one is watching, live as if someone is.

• Succeed at home first.

• Don’t spend tomorrow’s money today.

• Pray twice as much as you fret.

• Listen twice as much as you speak.

• Only harbor a grudge when God does.

• Never outgrow your love of sunsets.

• Treat people like angels; you will meet some and help make some.

• ‘Tis wiser to err on the side of generosity than on the side of scrutiny.

• God has forgiven you; you’d be wise to do the same.

• When you can’t trace God’s hand, trust his heart.

• Toot your own horn and the notes will be flat.

• Don’t feel guilty for God’s goodness.

• The book of life is lived in chapters, so know your page number.

• Never let the important be the victim of the trivial.

• Live your liturgy.

To sum it all up:

Approach life like a voyage on a schooner. Enjoy the view. Explore the vessel.

Make friends with the captain. Fish a little. And then get off when you get home.

## 17 He Speaks Through the Storm

I *Had heard about you before, but now I have seen you."* It all happened in one day. One day he could choose his tee time at the nicest golf course in the country; the next he couldn't even be the caddie. One day he could Lear jet across the country to see the heavyweight bout at the Las Vegas Mirage. The next he couldn't afford a city bus across town.

Talk about calm becoming chaos …

The first thing to go is his empire. The market crashes; his assets tumble. What is liquid goes dry. What has been up goes down. Stocks go flat, and Job goes broke. There he sits in his leather chair and soon-to-be-auctioned-off mahogany desk when the phone rings with news of calamity number two:

The kids were at a resort for the holidays when a storm blew in and took them with it.

Shell-shocked and dumbfounded, Job looks out the window into the sky that seems to be getting darker by the minute. He starts praying, telling God that things can't get any worse … and that's exactly what happens. He feels a pain in his chest that is more than last night's ravioli. The next thing he knows, he is bouncing in an ambulance with wires stuck to his chest and needles stuck in his arm.

He ends up tethered to a heart monitor in a community hospital room. Next to him lies an illegal immigrant who can't speak English.

Not, however, that Job lacks for conversation.

First there is his wife. Who could blame her for being upset at the week's calamities?

Who could blame her for telling Job to curse God? But to curse God *and die?* If Job doesn't already feel abandoned, you know he does the minute his wife tells him to pull the plug and be done with it.

Then there are his friends. They have the bedside manner of a drill sergeant and

the compassion of a chain-saw killer. A revised version of their theology might read like this:

“Boy, you must have done something really bad! We know that God is good, so if bad things are happening to you, then you have been bad. Period.” Does Job take that lying down? Not hardly.

“You are doctors who don’t know what they are doing,” he says. “Oh, please be quiet! That would be your highest wisdom.”

Translation? “Why don’t you take your philosophy back to the pigpen where you learned it.”

“I’m not a bad man,” Job argues. “I paid my taxes. I’m active in civic duties. I’m a major contributor to United Way and a volunteer at the hospital bazaar.” Job is, in his eyes, a good man. And a good man, he reasons, deserves a good answer.

“Your suffering is for your own good,” states Elihu, a young minister fresh out of seminary who hasn’t lived long enough to be cynical and hasn’t hurt enough to be quiet.

He paces back and forth in the hospital room, with his Bible under his arm and his finger punching the air.

“God does all these things to a man—twice, even three times—to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him.” Job follows his pacing like you’d follow a tennis player, head turning from side to side. What the young man says isn’t bad theology, but it isn’t much comfort, either. Job steadily tunes him out and slides lower and lower under the covers. His head hurts. His eyes burn. His legs ache. And he can’t stomach any more hollow homilies.

Yet his question still hasn’t been answered:

“God, why is this happening to me?”

So God speaks.

Out of the thunder, he speaks. Out of the sky, he speaks. For all of us who would put ditto marks under Job’s question and sign our names to it, he speaks.

• For the father who holds a rose taken off his son’s coffin, he speaks.

• For the wife who holds the flag taken off her husband’s casket, he speaks.

• For the couple with the barren womb and the fervent prayers, he speaks.

• For any person who has tried to see God through shattered glass, he speaks.

• For those of us who have dared to say, “If God is God, then … ,” God speaks.

He speaks out of the storm and into the storm, for that is where Job is. That is where God is best heard.

God’s voice thunders in the room. Elihu sits down. Job sits up. And the two will never be the same again.

“Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?” Job doesn’t respond.

“Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.”

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.”

One question would have been enough for Job, but it isn’t enough for God.

“Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying?” God asks. “What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone, as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” Questions rush forth. They pour like sheets of rain out of the clouds. They splatter in the chambers of Job’s heart with a wildness and a beauty and a terror that leave every Job who has ever lived drenched and speechless, watching the Master redefine who is who in the universe.

Have you ever once commanded the morning to appear, and caused the dawn to rise in the east? Have you ever told the daylight to spread to the ends of the earth, to end the night’s wickedness?

God’s questions aren’t intended to teach; they are intended to stun. They aren’t intended to enlighten; they are intended to awaken. They aren’t intended to stir

the mind; they are intended to bend the knees.

Has the location of the gates of Death been revealed to you? Do you realize the extent of the earth? Tell me about it if you know! Where does the light come from, and how do you get there? Or tell me about the darkness. Where does it come from? Can you find its boundaries, or go to its source? But of course you know all this! For you were born before it was all created, and you are so very experienced!

Finally Job's feeble hand lifts, and God stops long enough for him to respond. "I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I lay my hand upon my mouth in silence. I have said too much already."

God's message has connected:

• Job is a peasant, telling the King how to run the kingdom.

• Job is an illiterate, telling e. e. cummings to capitalize his personal pronouns.

• Job is the bat boy, telling Babe Ruth to change his batting stance.

• Job is the clay, telling the potter not to press so hard.

"I owe no one anything," God declares in the crescendo of the wind. "Everything under the heaven is mine."

Job couldn't argue. God owes no one anything. No explanations. No excuses. No help. God has no debt, no out-standing balance, no favors to return. God owes no man anything.

Which makes the fact that he gave us everything even more astounding.

How you interpret this holy presentation is key. You can interpret God's hammering speech as a divine "in-your-face" tirade if you want. You can use the list of unanswerable questions to prove that God is harsh, cruel, and distant. You can use the Book of Job as evidence that God gives us questions and no answers. But to do so, you need some scissors. To do so, you need to cut out the rest of the Book of Job.

For that is not how Job heard it. All his life, Job had been a good man. All his

life, he had believed in God. All his life, he had discussed God, had notions about him, and had prayed to him.

*But in the storm Job sees him!*

He sees Hope. Lover. Destroyer. Giver. Taker. Dreamer. Deliverer.

Job sees the tender anger of a God whose unending love is often received with peculiar mistrust. Job stands as a blade of grass against the consuming fire of God's splendor. Job's demands melt like wax as God pulls back the curtain and heaven's light falls uneclipsed across the earth.

*Job sees God.*

God could turn away at this point. The gavel has been slammed, the verdict has been rendered. The Eternal Judge has spoken.

Ah, but God is not angry with Job. Firm? Yes. Direct? No doubt. Clear and convincing? Absolutely. But angry? No.

God is never irritated by the candle of an honest seeker.

If you underline any passage in the Book of Job, underline this one: "I had heard about you before, but now I have seen you."

Job sees God—and that is enough.

But it isn't enough for God.

The years to come find Job once again sitting behind his mahogany desk with health restored and profits up. His lap is once again full of children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren—for four generations!

If Job ever wonders why God doesn't bring back the children he had taken away, he doesn't ask. Maybe he doesn't ask because he knows that his children could never be happier than they are in the presence of this One he has seen so briefly.

Something tells me that Job would do it all again, if that's what it took to hear God's voice and stand in the Presence. Even if God left him with his bedsores and bills, Job would do it again.

For God gave Job more than Job ever dreamed. God gave Job Himself.

**18 Pilgrim Ponderings**

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

The young woman, eight months heavy with child, waddles into her mother’s house.

Flops onto the sofa. Kicks off her tennis shoes. Props her puffy feet on the coffee table.

And groans, “I don’t think I can make it.”

Wise from the years, the mother picks up a photo album and sits down beside her daughter. She opens the album to photos of her children in diapers and ankle-high walking shoes. Slowly the two turn the memory-filled pages. They smile at the kids blowing out candles and sitting in front of Christmas trees.

As the mother sees yesterday, the daughter sees tomorrow.

And, for just a moment, the daughter is changed. The *here and now* becomes the *there and then.* Her child is born. She sees the first stumbling step taken. She hears the first word, discernible only to Mommy. She places the shiny, black, patent-leather shoes on the stockinged feet and Karo-syrups a ribbon on the nearly bald but ever-so-precious head.

A transformation occurs. The pain in her back is now overshadowed by the joy approaching. The hand that had rubbed the neck now rests on her stomach. For the first time that day, she smiles.

A snowstorm in Chicago. Stranded at O’Hare. No place to sit in the lobby, so he

walks to the coffee shop. No place to sit in the coffee shop, so he buys a cup to go, wanders back to the lobby, sits on his briefcase, and drapes his overcoat over his lap.

He looks at his watch. *Should I go to a hotel for the night?* he wonders. *It's nearly midnight! I should be halfway home by now. Who knows when I'll be able to leave?*

He sighs, leans back against a wall, and waits. He unbuttons his collar. Loosens his tie. Rubs his whiskered neck. His thoughts drift back over the week. Many calls made.

Few orders placed. Blame it on the economy. Blame it on the system. Blame it on God.

But blame doesn't put money in the bank.

There's an executive lobby across the hall with empty couches, snacks, and a television. In better times, he could afford the membership; now that money goes toward college tuition and braces for the kids.

A flight is announced. He pulls his boarding pass out of his overcoat breast pocket.

The flight isn't his. He sticks the pass back into the coat that stretches across his lap. A leather calendar tumbles out. He picks it up and, for no real reason, looks inside.

There, amidst taxi receipts and credit cards, is a laminated photo of a family—his family. Teenage daughter with eyes like her mom's and the metallic smile.

College-bound son wearing a necktie and blue jeans, mid-step between adolescence and adulthood. And his wife. My, has it been twenty-five years? Take away a few wrinkles and pounds, and he can see her in the white gown again.

For just a moment, he is home. The television is off. The kids are in bed. The dog is outside. The doors are locked. The fire is golden. His wife is asleep on the couch. For just a moment, the world of O'Hare, hotels, and sales calls are a world away. He is where it's all worthwhile. He is home.

Someone taps him on the shoulder, and he hears a kind voice. “Is that your flight?” He looks up into the half-empty lobby … sees the line forming at the gate … and smiles.

“Yeah,” the salesman says, standing. “It’s my flight home.” Four people snake their way up the mountain. The trip has been long; the hour is late.

A level place on the hillside is reached, and they sit down. They’re tired. Their muscles hurt. The grayness of twilight settles over them like a soft cloth.

The quartet of pilgrims longs to sleep, but only three do.

The fourth sits in the shadows. Legs crossed. Face skyward. The stars wink at their Maker. Winds waft over the shoulders of their Designer, cooling his neck. He slips off his sandals and rubs his sore feet and reflects on the wildness of it all.

A God with sore legs? Holiness with hunger? Divinity with thirst? A World Maker made weary by his world?

His thoughts drift homeward. *Nazareth. How good it would be to be home again.*

The memories surface so easily. Sawdust-covered workbench. Friends stopping to talk. Dinner-table laughter. Wrestling with his brothers. The synagogue. The house. The home.

*What I’d give to go home.*

But Nazareth would never be home again. They tried to kill him the last time he was there. Neighbors, friends, teachers, schoolmates … they squeezed the stones intended for his body. Even his brothers and sisters considered him insane. They wanted to hide him, to put him away. They were ashamed to be known as his family.

*No, Nazareth can never be home again.*

What about Galilee? He could go back to Galilee. There the crowds listened. There the people followed. But he shook his head. *As long as I made them bread … As long as I said what they wanted to hear …* He remembered the crowds as they turned away. He heard their jeering. He felt their rejection.

*No, I can never go back to Galilee.*

He thinks of Jerusalem. She offers no comfort. He knows what she will do to him. A foreboding pain stabs his wrists. He winces at the slicing of his brow. He sees the world around him growing darker, darker … *My God!* a premonition inside him cries.

He shakes his head and breathes a staggered breath. His thoughts return to the present.

He plucks a shoot of grass, puts it into his mouth, and sits in the shadow of his fear.

He looks at his followers, as asleep as they are naive. They have no idea. They just can't understand. He speaks of suffering; they think of conquering. He speaks of sacrifice; they think of celebration. He's an artist painting for the color-blind. He's a singer singing for the deaf. They nod their heads and clap their hands. They think they see. They think they hear. But they don't.

They can't see. No one sees.

Part of him knew it would be like this. And part of him never knew it would be so bad.

Part of him wonders, *Would it be so bad to give up?* After all, there might be a better era. There will be other generations … other people.

He has given his best, and what does he have? A ragged band of good-hearted but hardheaded followers who are destined to fall face-flat over promises they can't keep. He puts his face into his cupped hands and closes his eyes and prays. It's all he knows to do.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it, seeker? Was it so long ago that you were on a quest for truth—Galahad in search of the grail? But the forest of questions was deep. The thicket of perplexities thick. It was easier to say nothing than to ask why. So you stopped.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it, dreamer? You wanted so badly to change the world. Sure the mountain was high, but you were brave. Then the winds came. Sharp rocks of reality cut your feet, breaking your stride … breaking your heart. And

you found that the role of the cynic was less costly than the role of the dreamer. So you sat down.

You need to know something: Jesus sat down, too.

Oh, sure, there were moments when he stood tall. There were hours of splendor.

There were dynamic days during which the lepers leapt and the dead came alive and the people worshiped. Those days came.

But his plateaus of popularity were gorged by canyons of isolation.

And on this day, the crevasse is deep. Steep walls mock an easy escape. Rocky abutments imprison his vision. His strength has reached its solstice.

He sits down and puts a tear-streaked face into cupped palms and prays. It's all he can do.

And when his Father sees him, it's all his Father can take.

From another dimension, a light comes. It enters the solitary figure and glows.

"As he was praying," Luke writes, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning."

Jesus implodes with glory. For just a moment, he is transfigured; a roaring radiance pours from him. He becomes as he was before he came. For one brief, shining moment, the burden of his humanity is lifted. "Decarnation" occurs. He is elevated above earth's horizon and escorted into the eternal. He is home again. Familiar sounds surround him.

Those who understand welcome him. And the One who sent him … holds him.

Dusty trails and hard hearts are, literally, a world away.

The One who felt weary is reminded: the weariness will soon pass.

Moses and Elijah, aflame with eternal robes, stand beside their King. When Jesus was preparing himself in the desert for the work of life, angels came to encourage him. Now, on the mountain, preparing himself for the work of death,

Moses and Elijah draw near: Moses, the Lawgiver whose grave no man knew; Elijah, the prophet who sidestepped death in a fiery chariot.

The One who saw death is reminded: the grave is impotent.

And then, the voice thunders. God inhabits a cloud. It becomes a bonfire, puffy with brilliance. It consumes the shadows. It transforms the nightened mountain into a shining monument. And from the belly of the cloud, the Father speaks:

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” The One who had despaired is affirmed. “What people think doesn’t matter,” God shouts. “What I think does. And I’m proud.”

By now Jesus is standing. By now the apostles are awake.

For Peter, James, and John, the scene is bizarre: dazzling white clouds, a voice from the sky, living images from the past. But for Jesus, it is a view of home. A view into yesterday. A glimpse into tomorrow.

He is the mother—pregnant with new life, dreading the pains of childbirth.

He is the father—on a long journey in a cold place.

He is—as they were, as we are—given a glimpse of home.

And tomorrow’s dream becomes today’s courage.

**19 Our Storm was his Path**

S *uppose one of jesus’ disciples kept a journal. And suppose that disciple made an entry in the journal on the morning after the storm. And suppose we discovered that journal. Here is how it would read … I suppose.*

Only minutes before, chaos had erupted.

Oh, how the storm roared. Stars were hidden by a black ceiling. Clouds billowed like smoke. Bolts of lightning were the conductor’s baton that cued the kettledrums of thunder to rumble.

And rumble they did. The clouds seemed to rise as a bear on hind legs and

growl. The booms shook everything: the heavens, the earth, and—most of all—the sea. It was as if the Sea of Galilee were a bowl in the hands of a dancing giant. From the bowels of the lake the waves came, turning the glassy surface into a mountain range of snow-topped waves. Five, ten, even fifteen feet into the air they mounted, rising and falling like swallows chasing mosquitoes.

In the midst of the sea, our boat bounced. The waves slapped it as easily as children would a ball. Our straining at the oars scarcely budged it. We were at the storm's mercy.

The waves lifted us up so high that we felt like we were in midair. Then down into the valley we plunged.

We were a twig in a whirlpool … a leaf in the wind. We were helpless.

That's when the light appeared. At first I thought it was a reflection of the moon, a gleam on the surface of the water. But the night held no moon. I looked again. The light was moving toward us, not over the waves but through them. I wasn't the only one who saw it.

"A ghost," someone screamed. Fear of the sea was eclipsed by a new terror. Thoughts raced as the specter drew near. *Was it a figment of our imagination? Was it a vision?*

*Who? How? What was this mystical light that appeared so … ?*

A flash of lightning illuminated the sky. For a second I could see its face … his face.

A second was all I needed.

It was the Master!

He spoke:

"Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Nothing had changed. The storm still raged. The wind still shrieked. The boat still pitched. The thunder still boomed. The rain still slapped. But in the midst of the tumult, I could hear his voice. Although he was still far away, it was like he

was by my side. The night was ferocious, yet he spoke as though the sea were placid and the sky silent.

And, somehow, courage came.

“Lord, if it’s you, … tell me to come to you on the water.” The voice was Peter’s. He wasn’t being cocky. He wasn’t demanding proof. He was scared. Like me, he knew what this storm could do. He knew that the boat would soon go down. He knew that Jesus was standing up. And he knew where he wanted to be …

where we all wanted to be.

“Come on,” Jesus invited.

So Peter climbed over the side and stepped onto the sea. Before him opened a trail through a forest of waves. He stepped quickly. Water splashed. But he kept going. This path to Jesus was a ribbon of calm. It was peaceful. Serene.

Jesus radiated light at the end of the trail. Smiling.

Peter stepped toward the light like it was his only hope. He was halfway there when we all heard the thunder. It boomed, and he stopped. I saw his head turn. He looked up at the sky. He looked up at the clouds. He felt the wind. And down he went.

Boy did he yell!

A hand came through the water sheets and grabbed Peter. Lightning flashed again, and I could see the face of Jesus. I noticed that his smile was gone. Hurt covered his face.

It was like he couldn’t believe that we couldn’t believe. Danger to us was just a detour to him. I wanted to ask him, “Aren’t you afraid, Jesus? Aren’t you afraid?” But I said nothing. Before I knew it, he was in the boat with us.

The sea stilled as silk.

The winds hushed.

A canyon opened in the clouds; soft moonlight fell over the water.

It happened instantaneously. It didn't take the rest of the night. It didn't take an hour.

It didn't take a minute. It happened in a blink.

From chaos to calm. From panic to peace. The sky was so suddenly silent that I could hear my heart pounding. I thought I was dreaming. Then I saw the wide eyes of the others and felt my clothing soaked against my skin. This was no dream. I looked at the water. I looked at Peter. I looked at the others. And then I looked at him.

And I did the only thing I could have done. With the stars as my candles and the stilled boat as my altar, I fell at his feet and worshiped.

There are times in a person's life when, even in the midst of them, you know you'll never be the same. Moments that forever serve as journey posts. This was one.

I had never seen Jesus as I saw him then. I had seen him as powerful. I had seen him as wise. I had witnessed his authority and marveled at his abilities. But what I witnessed last night, I know I'll never forget.

I saw God. The God who can't sit still when the storm is too strong. The God who lets me get frightened enough to need him and then comes close enough for me to see him. The God who uses my storms as his path to come to me.

I saw God. It took a storm for me to see him. But I saw him. And I'll never be the same.

**20 They'd Do It Again**

They'd do it again. I'm confident they would. The disciples would get into the same boat and ride through the same storm. They'd do it again in a heartbeat. Why?

Because through the storm they saw the Savior.

Read this verse: "Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly

you are the Son of God.’”

After the storm, they worshiped him. They had never, as a group, done that before.

Never. Check it out. Open your Bible. Search for a time when the disciples corporately praised him.

You won’t find it.

You won’t find them worshiping when he heals the leper. Forgives the adulteress.

Preaches to the masses. They were willing to follow. Willing to leave family. Willing to cast out demons. Willing to be in the army.

But only after the incident on the sea did they worship him. Why?

Simple. This time, they were the ones who were saved. This time, their necks were removed from the noose. Their bodies were plucked from the deep. One minute, they were dangling over the edge of the abyss, staring into the throat of the slack-jawed canyon. The next, they were bottom-plopped and wide-eyed on the deck of a still boat on a placid sea.

So they worshiped. They did the only thing that they could do when their death sentence was stayed at the eleventh hour: They looked to the Eternal Governor who gave the pardon and thanked him.

When you recognize God as Creator, you will admire him. When you recognize his wisdom, you will learn from him. When you discover his strength, you will rely on him.

But only when he saves you will you worship him.

It’s a “before and after” scenario. Before your rescue, you could easily keep God at a distance. Comfortably dismissed. Neatly shelved. Sure he was important, but so was your career. Your status. Your salary. He was high on your priority list, but he shared the spot with others.

Then came the storm … the rage … the fight … the ripped moorings … the

starless night. Despair fell like a fog; your bearings were gone. In your heart, you knew there was no exit.

Turn to your career for help? Only if you want to hide from the storm … not escape it. Lean on your status for strength? A storm isn't impressed with your title. Rely on your salary for rescue? Many try … many fail.

Suddenly you are left with one option: God.

And when you ask … genuinely ask … he will come.

And from that moment on, he is not just a deity to admire, a teacher to observe, or a master to obey. He is the Savior. The Savior to be worshiped.

That's why I'm convinced that the disciples would do it again. They'd endure the storm another night … a thousand other nights … if that's what it took.

A season of suffering is a small price to pay for a clear view of God.

**Sting of Failure**

**21 Castles of Sorrow**

Sarah was rich. she had inherited twenty million dollars. Plus she had an additional income of one thousand dollars a day.

That's a lot of money any day, but it was immense in the late 1800s.

Sarah was well known. She was the belle of New Haven, Connecticut. No social event was complete without her presence. No one hosted a party without inviting her.

Sarah was powerful. Her name and money would open almost any door in America.

Colleges wanted her donations. Politicians clamored for her support. Organizations sought her endorsement.

Sarah was rich. Well known. Powerful. And miserable.

Her only daughter had died at five weeks of age. Then her husband had passed away.

She was left alone with her name, her money, her memories, … and her guilt.

It was her guilt that caused her to move west. A passion for penance drove her to San Jose, California. Her yesterdays imprisoned her todays, and she yearned for freedom.

She bought an eight-room farmhouse plus one hundred sixty adjoining acres. She hired sixteen carpenters and put them to work. For the next thirty-eight years, craftsmen labored every day, twenty-four hours a day, to build a mansion.

Observers were intrigued by the project. Sarah's instructions were more than eccentric … they were eerie. The design had a macabre touch. Each window was to have thirteen panes, each wall thirteen panels, each closet thirteen hooks, and each chandelier thirteen globes.

The floor plan was ghoulish. Corridors snaked randomly, some leading nowhere. One door opened to a blank wall, another to a fifty-foot drop. One set of stairs led to a ceiling that had no door. Trapdoors. Secret passageways. Tunnels. This was no retirement home for Sarah's future; it was a castle for her past.

The making of this mysterious mansion only ended when Sarah died. The completed estate sprawled over six acres and had six kitchens, thirteen bathrooms, forty stairways, forty-seven fireplaces, fifty-two skylights, four hundred sixty-seven doors, ten thousand windows, one hundred sixty rooms, and a bell tower.

Why did Sarah want such a castle? Didn't she live alone? "Well, sort of," those acquainted with her story might answer. "There were the visitors … " And the visitors came each night.

Legend has it that every evening at midnight, a servant would pass through the secret labyrinth that led to the bell tower. He would ring the bell … to summon the spirits.

Sarah would then enter the "blue room," a room reserved for her and her nocturnal guests. Together they would linger until 2:00 a.m., when the bell would be rung again.

Sarah would return to her quarters; the ghosts would return to their graves.

Who comprised this legion of phantoms?

Indians and soldiers killed on the U.S. frontier. They had all been killed by bullets from the most popular rifle in America—the Winchester. What had brought millions of dollars to Sarah Winchester had brought death to them.

So she spent her remaining years in a castle of regret, providing a home for the dead.

You can see this poltergeist place in San Jose, if you wish. You can tour its halls and see its remains.

But to see what unresolved guilt can do to a human being, you don't have to go to the Winchester mansion. Lives imprisoned by yesterday's guilt are in your own city. Hearts haunted by failure are in your own neighborhood. People plagued by pitfalls are just down the street … or just down the hall.

There is, wrote Paul, a "worldly sorrow" that "brings death." A guilt that kills. A sorrow that's fatal. A venomous regret that's deadly.

How many Sarah Winchesters do you know? How far do you have to go to find a soul haunted by ghosts of the past? Maybe not very far.

Maybe Sarah's story is your story.

If so, I'm especially grateful that this book has made its way into your hands. This final section has been written with you in mind. In these final chapters, I have assembled thoughts on failure and forgiveness.

For in the twilight hours during the storm's black night, there is a story of grace.

It is the story of Peter: recognizing the Master's voice … seeing the Master's face …

scrambling to safety from the storm.

It is also another story of Peter: hearing the winds … seeing the torrent … sinking into the water.

But most of all, it is the story of Jesus. It is the story of God extending his hand during stormy seas. It is the answer to the question every person asks: “What does God do when I fail?”

The answers to guilt’s questions are not found in a new house.

The answer is found in the foundation of the one you have.

## 22 Fear That Becomes Faith

“They saw Jesus … walking on the water; and they were terrified.” Faith is often the child of fear.

Fear propelled Peter out of the boat. He’d ridden these waves before. He knew what these storms could do. He’d heard the stories. He’d seen the wreckage. He knew the widows. He knew the storm could kill. And he wanted out.

All night he wanted out. For nine hours he’d tugged on sails, wrestled with oars, and searched every shadow on the horizon for hope. He was soaked to the soul and bone weary of the wind’s banshee wail.

Look into Peter’s eyes and you won’t see a man of conviction. Search his face and you won’t find a gutsy grimace. Later on, you will. You’ll see his courage in the garden.

You’ll witness his devotion at Pentecost. You’ll behold his faith in his epistles.

But not tonight. Look into his eyes tonight and see fear—a suffocating, heart-racing fear of a man who has no way out.

But out of this fear would be born an act of faith, for faith is often the child of fear.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” wrote the wise man.

Peter could have been his sermon illustration.

If Peter had seen Jesus walking on the water during a calm, peaceful day, do you think that he would have walked out to him?

Nor do I.

Had the lake been carpet smooth and the journey pleasant, do you think that Peter would have begged Jesus to take him on a stroll across the top of the water? Doubtful.

But give a man a choice between sure death and a crazy chance, and he'll take the chance … every time.

Great acts of faith are seldom born out of calm calculation.

It wasn't logic that caused Moses to raise his staff on the bank of the Red Sea.

It wasn't medical research that convinced Naaman to dip seven times in the river.

It wasn't common sense that caused Paul to abandon the Law and embrace grace.

And it wasn't a confident committee that prayed in a small room in Jerusalem for Peter's release from prison. It was a fearful, desperate, band of backed-into-a-corner believers. It was a church with no options. A congregation of have-nots pleading for help.

And never were they stronger.

At the beginning of every act of faith, there is often a seed of fear.

Biographies of bold disciples begin with chapters of honest terror. Fear of death. Fear of failure. Fear of loneliness. Fear of a wasted life. Fear of failing to know God.

Faith begins when you see God on the mountain and you are in the valley and you know that you're too weak to make the climb. You see what you need … you see what you have … and what you have isn't enough to accomplish anything.

Peter had given it his best. But his best wasn't enough.

Moses had a sea in front and an enemy behind. The Israelites could swim or they

could fight. But neither option was enough.

Naaman had tried the cures and consulted the soothsayers. Traveling a long distance to plunge into a muddy river made little sense when there were clean ones in his backyard. But what option did he have?

Paul had mastered the Law. He had mastered the system. But one glimpse of God convinced him that sacrifices and symbols were not enough.

The Jerusalem church knew that they had no hope of getting Peter out of prison. They had Christians who would fight, but too few. They had clout, but too little. They didn't need muscle. They needed a miracle.

So does Peter. He is aware of two facts: He is going down, and Jesus is staying up.

He knows where he would rather be.

There's nothing wrong with this response. Faith that begins with fear will end up nearer the Father.

I went to West Texas some time back to speak at the funeral of a godly, family friend.

He had raised five children. One son, Paul, told a story about his earliest memory of his father.

It was spring in West Texas—tornado season. Paul was only three or four years old at the time, but he remembers vividly the day that a tornado hit their small town.

His father hustled the kids indoors and had them lie on the floor while he laid a mattress over them. But his father didn't climb under the protection. Paul remembers peeking out from under the mattress and seeing him standing by an open window, watching the funnel cloud twist and churn across the prairie.

When Paul saw his father, he knew where he wanted to be. He struggled out of his mother's arms, crawled out from under the mattress, and ran to wrap his arms around his dad's leg.

“Something told me,” Paul said, “that the safest place to stand in a storm was next to my father.”

Something told Peter the same thing.

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter says, “tell me to come to you on the water.” Peter is not testing Jesus; he is pleading with Jesus. Stepping onto a stormy sea is not a move of logic; it is a move of desperation.

Peter grabs the edge of the boat. Throws out a leg … follows with the other. Several steps are taken. It’s as if an invisible ridge of rocks runs beneath his feet. At the end of the ridge is the glowing face of a never-say-die friend.

We do the same, don’t we? We come to Christ in an hour of deep need. We abandon the boat of good works. We realize, like Moses, that human strength won’t save us. So we look to God in desperation. We realize, like Paul, that all the good works in the world are puny when laid before the Perfect One. We realize, like Peter, that spanning the gap between us and Jesus is a feat too great for our feet. So we beg for help. Hear his voice.

And step out in fear, hoping that our little faith will be enough.

Faith is not born at the negotiating table where we barter our gifts in exchange for God’s goodness. Faith is not an award given to the most learned. It’s not a prize given to the most disciplined. It’s not a title bequeathed to the most religious.

Faith is a desperate dive out of the sinking boat of human effort and a prayer that God will be there to pull us out of the water. Paul wrote about this kind of faith in the letter to the Ephesians:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Paul is clear. The supreme force in salvation is God’s grace. Not our works. Not our talents. Not our feelings. Not our strength.

Salvation is God’s sudden, calming presence during the stormy seas of our lives. We hear his voice; we take the step.

We, like Paul, are aware of two things: We are great sinners and we need a great

Savior.

We, like Peter, are aware of two facts: We are going down and God is standing up. So we scramble out. We leave behind the *Titanic* of self-righteousness and stand on the solid path of God's grace.

And, surprisingly, we are able to walk on water. Death is disarmed. Failures are forgivable. Life has real purpose. And God is not only within sight, he is within reach.

With precious, wobbly steps, we draw closer to him. For a season of surprising strength, we stand upon his promises. It doesn't make sense that we are able to do this.

We don't claim to be worthy of such an incredible gift. When people ask how in the world we can keep our balance during such stormy times, we don't boast. We don't brag.

We point unabashedly to the One who makes it possible. Our eyes are on him.

"Nothing in my hand I bring; Simply to Thy cross I cling," we sing.

"Dressed in His righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne," we declare.

" 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved," we explain.

Some of us, unlike Peter, never look back.

Others of us, like Peter, feel the wind and are afraid.

Maybe we face the wind of pride: "I'm not such a bad sinner after all. Look at what I can do."

Perhaps we face the wind of legalism: "I know that Jesus is doing part of this, but I have to do the rest."

Most of us, though, face the wind of doubt: "I'm too bad for God to treat me this well. I don't deserve such a rescue."

And downward we plunge. Heavied by mortality's mortar, we sink. Gulping and thrashing, we fall into a dark, wet world. We open our eyes and see only blackness. We try to breathe, and no air comes. We kick and fight our way back to the surface.

With our heads barely above the water, we have to make a decision.

The prideful ask: "Do we 'save face' and drown in pride? Or do we scream for help and take God's hand?"

The legalists ask: "Do we sink under the lead-heavy weight of the Law? Or do we abandon the codes and beg for grace?"

The doubters ask: "Do we nurture doubt by mumbling, 'I've really let him down this time?' Or do we hope that the same Christ who called us out of the boat will call us out of the sea?"

We know Peter's choice.

"[As he was] beginning to sink, [he] cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"

"Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him." We also know the choice of another sailor in another storm.

Although separated by seventeen centuries, this sailor and Peter are drawn together by several striking similarities:

• Both made their living on the sea.

• Both met their Savior after a nine-hour battle in a storm.

• Both met the Father in fear and then followed him in faith.

• Both walked away from their boats and became preachers of the Truth.

You know the story of Peter, the first sailor. Let me tell you about the second, whose name was John.

He had served on the seas since he was eleven years old. His father, an English shipmaster in the Mediterranean, took him aboard and trained him well for a life

in the Royal Navy.

Yet what John gained in experience, he lacked in discipline. He mocked authority.

Ran with the wrong crowd. Indulged in the sinful ways of a sailor. Although his training would have qualified him to serve as an officer, his behavior caused him to be flogged and demoted.

In his early twenties, he made his way to Africa, where he became intrigued with the lucrative slave trade. At age twenty-one, he made his living on the *Greyhound,* a slave ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

John ridiculed the moral and poked fun at the religious. He even made jokes about a book that would eventually help reshape his life: *The Imitation of Christ.* In fact, he was degrading that book a few hours before his ship sailed into an angry storm.

That night the waves pummeled the *Greyhound,* spinning the ship one minute on the top of a wave. Plunging her the next into a watery valley.

John awakened to find his cabin filled with water. A side of the *Greyhound* had collapsed. Ordinarily such damage would have sent a ship to the bottom in a matter of minutes. The *Greyhound,* however, was carrying buoyant cargo and remained afloat.

John worked at the pumps all night. For nine hours, he and the other sailors struggled to keep the ship from sinking. But he knew that it was a losing cause. Finally, when his hopes were more battered than the vessel, he threw himself on the saltwater-soaked deck and pleaded, “If this will not do, then Lord have mercy on us all.” John didn’t deserve mercy, but he received it. The *Greyhound* and her crew survived.

John never forgot God’s mercy shown on that tempestuous day in the roaring Atlantic. He returned to England where he became a prolific composer. You’ve sung his songs, like this one:

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,*

*That saved a wretch like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found,*

*was blind, but now I see.*

This slave-trader-turned-songwriter was John Newton.

Along with his hymn writing, he also became a powerful pulpiteer. For nearly fifty years, he filled pulpits and churches with the story of the Savior who meets you and me in the storm.

A year or two before his death, people urged him to give up preaching because of his failing sight. “What!” he explained. “Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can yet speak?”

He wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. What had begun as a prayer of fear resulted in a lifetime of faith. During his last years, someone asked him about his health. He confessed that his powers were failing. “My memory is almost gone,” he said, “but I remember two things: I am a great sinner, and Jesus is a great Savior.” What more do you and I need to remember?

Two sailors and two seas. Two vessels in two storms. Two prayers of fear and two lives of faith. Uniting them is one Savior—one God who’ll walk through hell or high water to extend a helping hand to a child who cries for help.

**23 Why God Smiles**

I have a sketch of jesus laughing. It hangs on the wall across from my desk.

It’s quite a drawing. His head is back. His mouth is open. His eyes are sparkling. He isn’t just grinning. He isn’t just chuckling. He’s roaring. He hasn’t heard or seen one like that in quite a while. He’s having trouble catching his breath.

It was given to me by an Episcopal priest who carries cigars in his pocket and collects portraits of Jesus smiling. “I give them to anyone who might be inclined to take God too seriously,” he explained as he handed me the gift.

He pegged me well.

I’m not one who easily envisions a smiling God. A weeping God, yes. An angry God, OK. A mighty God, you bet. But a chuckling God? It seems too … too …

too unlike what God should do—and be. Which just shows how much I know—or don't know—about God.

What do I think he was doing when he stretched the neck of the giraffe? An exercise in engineering? What do I think he had in mind when he told the ostrich where to put his head? Spelunking? What do I think he was doing when he designed the mating call of an ape? Or the eight legs of the octopus? And what do I envision on his face when he saw Adam's first glance at Eve? A yawn?

Hardly.

As my vision improves and I'm able to read without my stained glasses, I'm seeing that a sense of humor is perhaps the only way God has put up with us for so long.

Is that him with a smile as Moses does a double take at the burning bush that speaks?

Is he smiling again as Jonah lands on the beach, dripping gastric juices and smelling like whale breath?

Is that a twinkle in his eye as he watches the disciples feed thousands with one boy's lunch?

Do you think that his face is deadpan as he speaks about the man with a two-by-four in his eye who points out a speck in a friend's eye?

Can you honestly imagine Jesus bouncing children on his knee with a somber face?

No, I think that Jesus smiled. I think that he smiled a bit at people and a lot with people.

Let me explain with an example.

We don't know a thing about her. We don't know her name … her background … her looks … her hometown. She came from nowhere and went nowhere. She disappeared the same way that she appeared, like a puff of smoke.

But what a delightful puff she was.

The disciples, during two years of training, hadn't done what she did in a few moments of conversing. She impressed God with her faith. The disciples' hearts may have been good. Their desire may have been sincere. But their faith didn't turn God's head.

Hers did. For all we don't know about her, we do know one remarkable truth: She impressed God with her faith. After that, anything else she ever did was insignificant.

"Woman, you have great faith!" Jesus stated.

Some statement. Especially when you consider God said it. The God who can put a handful of galaxies into his palm. The One who creates Everests as a hobby. The One who paints rainbows without a canvas. The One who can measure the thickness of mosquito wings with one hand and level a mountain with the other.

One would think that the Creator would not be easily impressed. But something about this woman brought a sparkle to his eyes and … most likely … a smile to his face.

Matthew called her a "Canaanite woman" and, in doing so, called strikes one and two. Strike one? A Canaanite. An outsider. A foreigner. An apple in a family tree of oranges. Strike two? A woman. Might as well have been a junkyard dog. She lived in a culture that had little respect for women outside the bedroom and kitchen.

But she met the Teacher, who had plenty of respect for her.

Oh, it doesn't appear that way. In fact, the dialogue between the two seems harsh. It's not an easy passage to understand unless you're willing to concede that Jesus knew how to smile. If you have trouble with the sketch of the smiling Jesus hanging in my office, you'll have trouble with this story. But if you don't, if the thought of God smiling brings you a bit of relief, then you'll like the next few paragraphs.

Here's my interpretation.

The woman is desperate. Her daughter is demon possessed.

The Canaanite woman has no right to ask anything of Jesus. She is not a Jew. She is not a disciple. She offers no money for the ministry. She makes no promises to devote herself to missionary service. You get the impression that she knows as well as anybody that Jesus doesn't owe her anything, and she is asking him for everything. But that doesn't slow her down. She persists in her plea.

"Have mercy on me!"

Matthew notes that Jesus says nothing at first. Nothing. He doesn't open his mouth.

Why?

To test her? Most commentators suggest this. Maybe, they say, he is waiting to see how serious she is about her plea. My dad used to make me wait a week from the day I asked him for something to the day he gave me his answer. Most of the time, I forgot that I ever made the request. Time has a way of separating whims from needs. Is Jesus doing that?

I have another opinion. I think that he was admiring her. I think that it did his heart good to see some spunky faith for a change. I think that it refreshed him to see someone asking him to do the very thing he came to do—give great gifts to unworthy children.

How strange that we don't allow him to do it more often for us.

Perhaps the most amazing response to God's gift is our reluctance to accept it. We want it. But on our terms. For some odd reason, we feel better if we earn it. So we create religious hoops and hop through them—making God a trainer, us his pets, and religion a circus.

The Canaanite woman knew better. She had no resume. She claimed no heritage. She had no earned degrees. She knew only two things: Her daughter was weak, and Jesus was strong.

The disciples are annoyed. As Jesus sits in silence, they grow more smug. "Send her away," they demand. The spotlight is put on Jesus. He looks at the disciples, then looks at the woman. And what follows is one of the most intriguing dialogues in the New Testament.

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” he says.

“Lord, help me!”

“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs,” he answers.

“But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” she responds.

Is Jesus being rude? Is he worn-out? Is he frustrated? Is he calling this woman a dog?

How do we explain this dialogue?

Bible commentaries give us three options.

Some say that Jesus was trapped. He could not help the woman because he had been sent first to the lost sheep of Israel. Neat theory, but full of problems. One is the Samaritan woman. Another is the centurion. Jesus had already helped Gentiles and stayed faithful to the focus of his mission. So why couldn’t he do it now?

Others think that Jesus was rude. Who can blame him? He was tired. It had been a long trip. The disciples were coming along pretty slowly. And this request was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Like that explanation? I don’t either. The one who had had compassion on the five thousand men … who had wept over the city of Jerusalem … who had come to seek and save ones like this one … would not snap so abruptly at such a needy woman.

The most popular theory is that he was testing her … again. Just to be sure that she was serious about her request. Just to make sure that her faith was real.

But by insinuating that she was a dog?

I don’t think Jesus would do that, either. Let me suggest another alternative.

Could it be that Jesus’ tongue is poking his cheek? Could it be that he and the woman are engaging in satirical banter? Is it wry exchange in which God’s

unlimited grace is being highlighted? Could Jesus be so delighted to have found one who is not bartering with a religious system or proud of a heritage that he can't resist a bit of satire?

He knows he can heal her daughter. He knows he isn't bound by a plan. He knows her heart is good. So he decides to engage in a humorous moment with a faithful woman.

In essence, here's what they said:

"Now, you know that God only cares about Jews," he says smiling.

And when she catches on, she volleys back, "But your bread is so precious, I'll be happy to eat the crumbs."

In a spirit of exuberance, he bursts out, "Never have I seen such faith! Your daughter is healed."

This story does not portray a contemptuous God. It portrays a willing One who delights in a sincere seeker.

Aren't you glad he does?

The story is told about the time Napoleon's steed got away from him. An alert private jumped on his own horse and chased down the general's horse. When he presented the reins of the animal to Napoleon, the ruler took them, smiled at this willing private, and said, "Thank you, Captain."

The soldier's eyes widened at what he had heard. He then straightened. Saluted. And snapped, "Thank you, sir!"

He immediately went to the barracks. Got his bags. Moved into the officers' quarters.

Took his old uniform to the quartermaster and exchanged it for that of a captain. By the general's word, he had become a private-turned-commissioned officer. He didn't argue.

He didn't shrug. He didn't doubt. He knew that the one who had the power to do it had done it. And he accepted that.

If only we would do the same. If only we would have the faith of the private and the trust of the Canaanite woman. If only, when God smiles and says we are saved, we'd salute him, thank him, and live like those who have just received a gift from the commander in chief.

We seldom do that, though. We prefer to get salvation the old-fashioned way: We earn it. To accept grace is to admit failure, a step we are hesitant to take. We opt to impress God with how good we are rather than confessing how great he is. We dizzy ourselves with doctrine. Burden ourselves with rules. Think that God will smile on our efforts.

He doesn't.

God's smile is not for the healthy hiker who boasts that he made the journey alone. It is, instead, for the crippled leper who begs God for a back on which to ride.

Such were the woman's words. She knew that her request was ludicrous. But she also knew that Jesus was Lord.

Daniel's words could have been hers: "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy."

She came, banking on the hope that Jesus would answer her prayer based on his goodness and not her worthiness.

And he did. With a smile.

When I think about the prayers God has answered for me in spite of the life I've lived, I think he must be smiling still.

So I think I'll keep his picture on the wall.

**24 The Sacrificial Visitor**

Let me describe a scene to you and then ask you to come back to it at the end of the chapter.

An old man walks down a Florida beach. The sun sets like an orange ball on the horizon. The waves slap the sand. The smell of saltwater stings the air. The

beach is vacant. No sun to entice the sunbathers. Not enough light for the fishermen. So, aside from a few joggers and strollers, the gentleman is alone.

He carries a bucket in his bony hand. A bucket of shrimp. It's not for him. It's not for the fish. It's for the sea gulls.

He walks to an isolated pier cast in gold by the setting sun. He steps out to the end of the pier. The time has come for the weekly ritual.

He stands and waits.

Soon the sky becomes a mass of dancing dots. The evening silence gives way to the screeching of birds. They fill the sky and then cover the moorings. They are on a pilgrimage to meet the old man.

For a half hour or so, the bushy-browed, shoulder-bent gentleman will stand on the pier, surrounded by the birds of the sea, until his bucket is empty.

But even after the food is gone, his feathered friends still linger. They linger as if they're attracted to more than just food. They perch on his hat. They walk on the pier.

And they all share a moment together.

Got the scene? Now put it on the back burner for a few minutes.

*Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.*

*Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."*

This is not the day that Jesus fed the five thousand men; it is the day he fed the *four* thousand. Although the events have much in common, they are different in several respects:

• When Jesus fed the five thousand, he was with Jews. When he fed the four thousand (plus women and children), he was in Decapolis, a Gentile region.

• When Jesus fed the five thousand, he taught and healed them. When he was with the four thousand, there is no record that he taught—only that he healed.

• When Jesus was with the five thousand, he was with them for one afternoon.

• When he was with the four thousand, he was with them for three days.

And for three days he did a most remarkable thing: He healed them. “The lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others” came to him, Matthew wrote, “and he healed them.”

Many times I wish that the New Testament writers had been a bit more descriptive.

This is one of those times. “And he healed them” is too short a phrase to describe what must have been an astonishing sight.

Let your imagination go. Can you see the scene?

Can you see the blind husband seeing his wife for the first time? His eyes gazing into her tear-filled ones like she was the queen of the morning?

Envision the man who had never walked, now walking! Don’t you know that he didn’t want to sit down? Don’t you know that he ran and jumped and did a dance with the kids?

And what about the mute who could speak? Can you picture him sitting by the fire late into the night and talking? Saying and singing everything and anything that he had ever wanted to say and sing.

And the deaf woman who could now hear. What was it like when she heard her child call her “Mamma” for the first time?

For three days it went on. Person after person. Mat after mat. Crutch after crutch.

Smile after smile. No record is given of Jesus preaching or teaching or instructing or challenging. He just healed.

“The people,” Matthew wrote, “were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing.” Four thousand amazed people, each telling a story grander than the other. In the midst of them all is Jesus. Not complaining. Not postponing. Not demanding. Just enjoying every minute.

Then Matthew, still the great economizer of words, gave us another phrase on which I wish he would have elaborated:

“They praised the God of Israel.”

I wonder how they did that? I feel more certain of what they *didn’t* do than of what they did do. I feel confident that they didn’t form a praise committee. I feel confident that they didn’t make any robes. I feel confident that they didn’t sit in rows and stare at the back of each other’s heads.

I doubt seriously if they wrote a creed on how they were to praise this God they had never before worshiped. I can’t picture them getting into an argument over technicalities.

I doubt if they felt it had to be done indoors.

And I know they didn’t wait until the Sabbath to do it.

In all probability, they just did it. Each one—in his or her own way, with his or her own heart—just praised Jesus. Perhaps some people came and fell at Jesus’ feet. Perhaps some shouted his name. Maybe a few just went up on the hillside, looked into the sky, and smiled.

I can picture a mom and dad standing speechless before the Healer as they hold their newly healed baby.

I can envision a leper staring in awe at the One who took away his terror.

I can imagine throngs of people pushing and shoving. Wanting to get close. Not to request anything or demand anything, but just to say “thank you.” Perhaps some tried to pay Jesus, but what payment would have been sufficient?

Perhaps some tried to return his gift with another, but what could a person give that would express the gratitude?

All the people could do was exactly what Matthew said they did. “They praised the God of Israel.”

However they did it, they did it. And Jesus was touched, so touched that he insisted they stay for a meal before they left.

Without using the word *worship,* this passage defines it. Worship is when you’re aware that what you’ve been given is far greater than what you can give. Worship is the awareness that were it not for his touch, you’d still be hobbling and hurting, bitter and broken. Worship is the half-glazed expression on the parched face of a desert pilgrim as he discovers that the oasis is not a mirage.

Worship is the “thank you” that refuses to be silenced.

We have tried to make a science out of worship. We can’t do that. We can’t do that any more than we can “sell love” or “negotiate peace.” Worship is a voluntary act of gratitude offered by the saved to the Savior, by the healed to the Healer, and by the delivered to the Deliverer. And if you and I can go days without feeling an urge to say “thank you” to the One who saved, healed, and delivered us, then we’d do well to remember what he did.

The old man on the pier couldn’t go a week without saying “thank you.” His name was Eddie Rickenbacker. If you were alive in October 1942, you probably remember the day that he was reported missing at sea.

He had been sent on a mission to deliver a message to Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

With a handpicked crew in a B-17 known as the “Flying Fortress,” he set off across the South Pacific. Somewhere the crew became lost, the fuel ran out, and the plane went down.

All eight crew members escaped into the life rafts. They battled the weather, the water, the sharks, and the sun. But most of all, they battled the hunger. After eight days, their rations were gone. They ran out of options. It would take a miracle for them to survive.

And a miracle occurred.

After an afternoon devotional service, the men said a prayer and tried to rest. As Rickenbacker was dozing with his hat over his eyes, something landed on his

head. He would later say that he knew it was a sea gull. He didn't know how he knew; he just knew. That gull meant food … if he could catch it. And he did.

The flesh was eaten. The intestines were used as fish bait. And the crew survived.

What was a sea gull doing hundreds of miles away from land?

Only God knows.

But whatever the reason, Rickenbacker was thankful. As a result, every Friday evening this old captain walked to the pier, his bucket full of shrimp and his heart full of thanks.

We'd be wise to do the same. We've much in common with Rickenbacker. We, too, were saved by a Sacrificial Visitor.

We, too, were rescued by One who journeyed far from only God knows where.

And we, like the captain, have every reason to look into the sky … and worship.

**25 Holiness In a Bathrobe**

When your world touches God's world, the result is a holy moment. When God's high hope kisses your earthly hurt, that moment is holy. That moment might happen on a Sunday during Communion or on a Thursday night at the skating rink. It might occur in a cathedral or in a subway, by a burning bush or by a feed trough. When and where don't matter. What matters is that holy moments occur. Daily. And I'd like to talk to you about the holiest of those moments—I'd like to talk to you about the holiest moment of your life.

No, not your birth. Not your wedding. Not the birth of a child. I'm talking about *the* holiest moment of your life. Those other moments are special. They sparkle with reverence. But compared to this moment, they are about as holy as a burp.

I'm talking about the sacred hour.

No, not your baptism or your christening. Not your first Communion or your first confession or even your first date. I know those moments are precious and certainly sacrosanct, but I've a different moment in mind.

It happened this morning. Right after you awoke. Right there in your house. Did you miss it? Let me recreate the scene.

The alarm rings. Your wife pokes you or your husband nudges you or your mom or dad shakes you. And you wake up.

You've already hit the sleeper button three times; hit it again and you'll be late.

You've already asked for five more minutes … five different times; ask again and you'll get water poured on your head.

The hour has come. Daybreak has broken. So, with a groan and a grunt, you throw back the covers and kick a warm foot out into a cold world. It's followed by a reluctant companion.

You lean up and sit on the edge of the bed and stare at the back of your eyelids. You tell them to open, but they object. You pry them apart with your palms and peek into the room.

(The moment isn't holy yet, but it's almost here.)

You stand. At that moment, everything that will hurt during the course of the day hurts. It's as if the little person in your brain that's in charge of pain needs to test the circuits before you make it to the bathroom.

"Back pain?"

"Check."

"Stiff neck?"

"Check."

"High school football knee injury."

"Still hurting."

"Flaky scalp?"

"Still itching."

“Hay fever reaction?”

“Achoo!”

With the grace of a pregnant elephant, you step toward the bathroom. You wish there is some way to turn on the light slowly, but there isn’t. So you slap on the spotlight, blink as your eyes adjust, and step up to the bathroom sink.

You are approaching the sacred. You may not know it, but you have just stepped on holy tile. You are in the inner sanctum. The burning bush of your world.

The holiest moment of your life is about to occur. Listen. You’ll hear the fluttering of angels’ wings signaling their arrival. Trumpets are poised on heaven’s lips. A cloud of majesty encircles your bare feet. Heaven’s hosts cease all motion as you raise your eyes and …

(Get ready. Here it comes. The holy moment is nigh.) Cymbals clash. Trumpets echo in sacred halls. Heaven’s children race through the universe scattering flower petals. Stars dance. The universe applauds. Trees sway in choreographed adulation. And well they should, for the child of the King has awakened.

Look in the mirror. Behold the holy one. Don’t turn away. The image of perfection is looking back at you. The holy moment has arrived.

I know what you are thinking. *You call that “holy”? You call that “perfect”? You don’t know what I look like at 6:30 a.m.*

No, but I can guess. Hair matted. Pajamas or nightgown wrinkled. Chunks of sleep stuck in the corners of your eyes. Belly bulging. Dried-out lips. Pudgy eyes. Breath that could stain a wall. A face that could scare a dog.

“Anything but holy,” you say. “Give me an hour and I’ll look holy. Give me some coffee, some makeup. Give me a toothbrush and a hairbrush, and I’ll make this body presentable. A little perfume … a splash of cologne. Then take me into the Holy of Holies. Then I’ll make heaven smile.”

Ah, but there’s where you’re wrong. You see, what makes the morning moment so holy is its honesty. What makes the morning mirror hallowed is that you are seeing exactly who God sees.

And who God loves.

No makeup. No pressed shirts. No power ties. No matching shoes. No layers of images. No status jewelry. Just unkempt honesty.

Just you.

If people love you at 6:30 in the morning, one thing is sure: They love *you.* They don't love your title. They don't love your style. They don't love your accomplishments.

They just love you.

"Love," wrote one forgiven soul, "covers over a multitude of sins." Sounds like God's love.

"He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy," wrote another.

Underline the word *perfect.* Note that the word is not *better.* Not *improving.* Not *on the upswing.* God doesn't improve; he perfects. He doesn't enhance; he completes. What does the perfect person lack?

Now I realize that there's a sense in which we're imperfect. We still err. We still stumble. We still do exactly what we don't want to do. And that part of us is, according to the verse, "being made holy."

But when it comes to our position before God, we're perfect. When he sees each of us, he sees one who has been made perfect through the One who is perfect—Jesus Christ.

"All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." This morning I "put on" clothing to hide the imperfections I'd rather not display.

When you see me, fully clothed, you can't see my moles, scars, or bumps. Those are hidden.

When we choose to be baptized, by lifestyle as much as by symbol, into Christ, the same shielding occurs. Our sins and faults are lost beneath the sheer radiance of his covering. "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Please, don't miss the impact of this verse. When God sees us, he also sees

Christ. He sees perfection!

Not perfection earned by us, mind you, but perfection paid for by him.

Reflect on these words for a moment:

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that *in him* [emphasis mine] we might become the righteousness of God.”

Now read these words in the Phillips translation:

“For God caused Christ, who himself knew nothing of sin, actually to *be* sin for our sakes, so that in Christ we might be made good with the goodness of God.” Note the last four words: “the goodness of God.” God’s goodness is your goodness.

You are absolute perfection. Flawless. Without defects or mistakes. Unsullied. Unrivaled.

Unmarred. Peerless. Virgin pure. Undeserved yet unreserved perfection.

No wonder heaven applauds when you wake up. A masterpiece has stirred.

“Shh,” whisper the stars, “look at the wonder of that child.”

“My!” gasp the angels, “what a prodigy God has created.” So while you groan, eternity gasps with wonder. As you stumble, angels are star struck. What you see in the mirror as morning disaster is, in reality, a morning miracle.

Holiness in a bathrobe.

Go ahead and get dressed. Go ahead and put on the rings, shave the whiskers, comb the hair, and cover the moles. Do it for yourself. Do it for the sake of your image. Do it to keep your job. Do it for the benefit of those who have to sit beside you. But don’t do it for God.

He has already seen you as you really are. And in his book, you are perfect.

## 26 The Choice

Why do I want to do bad?” my daughter asked me, unknowingly posing a

question asked by many seekers of truth. “Why do I do the thing I hate? What is this ape that gibbers within?” Or, perhaps a more basic question is being asked. “If sin separates me from God, why doesn’t God separate me from sin? Why doesn’t he remove from me the option to sin?”

To answer that, let’s go to the beginning.

Let’s go to the Garden and see the seed that both blessed and cursed. Let’s see why God gave man … the choice.

Behind it all was a choice. A deliberate decision. An informed move. He didn’t have to do it. But he chose to. He knew the price. He saw the implications. He was aware of the consequences.

We don’t know when he decided to do it. We can’t know. Not just because we weren’t there. Because time was not there. *When* did not exist. Nor did *tomorrow* or *yesterday* or *next time*. For there was no time.

We don’t know when he thought about making the choice. But we do know that he made it. He didn’t have to do it. He chose to.

He chose to create.

“In the beginning God created … ”

With one decision, history began. Existence became measurable.

Out of nothing came light.

Out of light came day.

Then came sky … and earth.

And on this earth? A mighty hand went to work.

Canyons were carved. Oceans were dug. Mountains erupted out of flatlands. Stars were flung. A universe sparkled.

Our sun became just one of millions. Our galaxy became just one of thousands.

Planets invisibly tethered to suns roared through space at breakneck speeds.

Stars blazed with heat that could melt our planet in seconds.

The hand behind it was mighty. He is mighty.

And with this might, he created. As naturally as a bird sings and a fish swims, he created. Just as an artist can't not paint and a runner can't not run, he couldn't not create.

He was the Creator. Through and through, he was the Creator. A tireless dreamer and designer.

From the pallet of the Ageless Artist came inimitable splendors. Before there was a person to see it, his creation was pregnant with wonder. Flowers didn't just grow; they blossomed. Chicks weren't just born; they hatched. Salmons didn't just swim; they leaped.

Mundaneness found no home in his universe.

He must have loved it. Creators relish creating. I'm sure his commands were delightful! "Hippo, you won't walk … you'll waddle!" "Hyena, a bark is too plain. Let me show you how to laugh!" "Look, raccoon, I've made you a mask!" "Come here, giraffe, let's stretch that neck a bit." And on and on he went. Giving the clouds their puff.

Giving the oceans their blue. Giving the trees their sway. Giving the frogs their leap and croak. The mighty wed with the creative, and creation was born.

He was mighty. He was creative.

And he was love. Even greater than his might and deeper than his creativity was one all-consuming characteristic:

Love.

Water must be wet. A fire must be hot. You can't take the wet out of water and still have water. You can't take the heat out of fire and still have fire.

In the same way, you can't take the love out of this One who lived before time and still have him exist. For he was … and is … Love.

Probe deep within him. Explore every corner. Search every angle. Love is all you find. Go to the beginning of every decision he has made and you'll find it. Go to the end of every story he has told and you'll see it.

Love.

No bitterness. No evil. No cruelty. Just love. Flawless love. Passionate love. Vast and pure love. He is love.

As a result, an elephant has a trunk with which to drink. A kitten has a mother from which to nurse. A bird has a nest in which to sleep. The same God who was mighty enough to carve out the canyon is tender enough to put hair on the legs of the Matterhorn Fly to keep it warm. The same force that provides symmetry to the planets guides the baby kangaroo to its mother's pouch before the mother knows it is born.

And because of who he was, he did what he did.

He created a paradise. A sinless sanctuary. A haven before fear. A home before there was a human dweller. No time. No death. No hurt. A gift built by God for his ultimate creation. And when he was through, he knew "it was very good." But it wasn't enough.

His greatest work hadn't been completed. One final masterpiece was needed before he would stop.

Look to the canyons to see the Creator's splendor. Touch the flowers and see his delicacy. Listen to the thunder and hear his power. But gaze on this—the zenith—and witness all three … and more.

Imagine with me what may have taken place on that day.

He placed one scoop of clay upon another until a form lay lifeless on the ground.

All of the Garden's inhabitants paused to witness the event. Hawks hovered. Giraffes stretched. Trees bowed. Butterflies paused on petals and watched.

"You will love me, nature," God said. "I made you that way. You will obey me, universe. For you were designed to do so. You will reflect my glory, skies, for that is how you were created. But this one will be like me. This one will be able

to choose.” All were silent as the Creator reached into himself and removed something yet unseen. A seed. “It’s called ‘choice.’ The seed of choice.” Creation stood in silence and gazed upon the lifeless form.

An angel spoke, “But what if he … ”

“What if he chooses not to love?” the Creator finished. “Come, I will show you.” Unbound by today, God and the angel walked into the realm of tomorrow.

“There, see the fruit of the seed of choice, both the sweet and the bitter.” The angel gasped at what he saw. Spontaneous love. Voluntary devotion. Chosen tenderness. Never had he seen anything like these. He felt the love of the Adams. He heard the joy of Eve and her daughters. He saw the food and the burdens shared. He absorbed the kindness and marveled at the warmth.

“Heaven has never seen such beauty, my Lord. Truly, this is your greatest creation.”

“Ah, but you’ve only seen the sweet. Now witness the bitter.” A stench enveloped the pair. The angel turned in horror and proclaimed, “What is it?” The Creator spoke only one word: “Selfishness.”

The angel stood speechless as they passed through centuries of repugnance. Never had he seen such filth. Rotten hearts. Ruptured promises. Forgotten loyalties. Children of the creation wandering blindly in lonely labyrinths.

“This is the result of choice?” the angel asked.

“Yes.”

“They will forget you?”

“Yes.”

“They will reject you?”

“Yes.”

“They will never come back?”

“Some will. Most won’t.”

“What will it take to make them listen?”

The Creator walked on in time, further and further into the future, until he stood by a tree. A tree that would be fashioned into a cradle. Even then he could smell the hay that would surround him.

With another step into the future, he paused before another tree. It stood alone, a stubborn ruler of a bald hill. The trunk was thick, and the wood was strong. Soon it would be cut. Soon it would be trimmed. Soon it would be mounted on the stony brow of another hill. And soon he would be hung on it.

He felt the wood rub against a back he did not yet wear.

“Will you go down there?” the angel asked.

“I will.”

“Is there no other way?”

“There is not.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to not plant the seed? Wouldn’t it be easier to not give the choice?”

“It would,” the Creator spoke slowly. “But to remove the choice is to remove the love.”

He looked around the hill and foresaw a scene. Three figures hung on three crosses.

Arms spread. Heads fallen forward. They moaned with the wind.

Men clad in soldiers’ garb sat on the ground near the trio. They played games in the dirt and laughed.

Men clad in religion stood off to one side. They smiled. Arrogant, cocky. They had protected God, they thought, by killing this false one.

Women clad in sorrow huddled at the foot of the hill. Speechless. Faces tear

streaked.

Eyes downward. One put her arm around another and tried to lead her away. She wouldn't leave. "I will stay," she said softly. "I will stay." All heaven stood to fight. All nature rose to rescue. All eternity poised to protect. But the Creator gave no command.

"It must be done … ," he said, and withdrew.

But as he stepped back in time, he heard the cry that he would someday scream: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He wrenched at tomorrow's agony.

The angel spoke again. "It would be less painful … " The Creator interrupted softly. "But it wouldn't be love." They stepped into the Garden again. The Maker looked earnestly at the clay creation.

A monsoon of love swelled up within him. He had died for the creation before he had made him. God's form bent over the sculptured face and breathed. Dust stirred on the lips of the new one. The chest rose, cracking the red mud. The cheeks fleshened. A finger moved. And an eye opened.

But more incredible than the moving of the flesh was the stirring of the spirit. Those who could see the unseen gasped.

Perhaps it was the wind who said it first. Perhaps what the star saw that moment is what has made it blink ever since. Maybe it was left to an angel to whisper it:

"It looks like … it appears so much like … it is him!" The angel wasn't speaking of the face, the features, or the body. He was looking inside—at the soul.

"It's eternal!" gasped another.

Within the man, God had placed a divine seed. A seed of his self. The God of might had created earth's mightiest. The Creator had created, not a creature, but another creator.

And the One who had chosen to love had created one who could love in return.

Now it's our choice.

## 27 Caught with Your Pants Down, but Your Head Up

Steve lyons will be remembered as the player who dropped his pants.

He could be remembered as an outstanding infielder … as the player who played every position for the Chicago White Sox … as the guy who always dove into first base

… as a favorite of the fans who high fived the guy who caught the foul ball in the bleachers. He could be remembered as an above-average player who made it with average ability.

But he won't. He'll be remembered as the player who dropped his pants on July 16, 1990.

The White Sox were playing the Tigers in Detroit. Lyons bunted and raced down the first-base line. He knew it was going to be tight, so he dove at the bag. Safe! The Tiger's pitcher disagreed. He and the umpire got into a shouting match, and Lyons stepped in to voice his opinion.

Absorbed in the game and the debate, Lyons felt dirt trickling down the inside of his pants. Without missing a beat he dropped his britches, wiped away the dirt, and … uh oh

… twenty thousand jaws hit the bleachers' floor.

And, as you can imagine, the jokes began. Women behind the White Sox dugout waved dollar bills when he came onto the field. "No one," wrote one columnist, "had ever dropped his drawers on the field. Not Wally Moon. Not Blue Moon Odom. Not even Heinie Manush." Within twenty-four hours of the "exposure," he received more exposure than he'd gotten his entire career: seven live television and approximately twenty radio interviews.

"We've got this pitcher, Melido Perez, who earlier this month pitched a no-hitter," Lyons stated, "and I'll guarantee you he didn't do two live television shots afterwards. I pull my pants down, and I do seven. Something's pretty skewed toward the zany in this game."

Fortunately, for Steve, he was wearing sliding pants under his baseball pants.

Otherwise the game would be rated “R” instead of “PG-13.” Now, I don’t know Steve Lyons. I’m not a White Sox fan. Nor am I normally appreciative of men who drop their pants in public. But I think Steve Lyons deserves a salute.

I think anybody who dives into first base deserves a salute. How many guys do you see roaring down the baseline of life more concerned about getting a job done than they are about saving their necks? How often do you see people diving headfirst into anything?

Too seldom, right? But when we do … when we see a gutsy human throwing caution to the wind and taking a few risks … ah, now that’s a person worthy of a pat on the …back.

So here’s to all the Steve Lyons of the world.

Here’s to the Miracles, a choral group out of Memphis, Tennessee, made up of the mentally retarded and the stout-hearted. Just see if you can listen to them and still feel sorry for yourself.

Here’s to the hero of the San Francisco marathon who crossed the finish line without seeing it. (He was blind.)

Here’s to the woman whose husband left her with a nest of kids to raise and bills to pay, but who somehow tells me every Sunday that God has never been closer.

Here’s to the single father of two girls who learned to braid their hair.

Here’s to the grandparents who came out of retirement to raise the children their children couldn’t raise.

Here’s to the foster parents who took in a child long enough for that child to take their hearts—then gave the child up again.

Here’s to the girl, told by everyone to abort the baby, who chose to keep the baby.

Here’s to the doctor who treats more than half of his patients for free.

Here’s to the heroin-addict-turned-missionary.

Here’s to the executive who every Tuesday hosts a 5:30 a.m. meeting for Bible study and prayer.

Here’s to all of you reckless lovers of life and God, who stand on first base because you paid a price to get there.

So what if you forget about pleasing the crowd and get caught with your pants down?

At least you’re playing ball in the pros.

Most of us aren’t even in your league.

**28 Lemonade and Grace**

“Lemonade, *5¢* ”

The *e* is larger than the *L*. The *m* is upper cased; all the other letters are lowered. The last two letters, *de,* curve downward because the artist ran out of room on the poster board.

Norman Rockwell would have loved it.

Two girls sit on the sidewalk in little chairs behind a little table. The six-year-old is the cashier. She monitors a plastic bowl of change. The four-year-old is the waitress. She handles the ice. Pours the drinks. Stacks and restacks the paper cups.

Behind them, seated on the grass, is Dad. He leans against an oak tree and smiles as he witnesses his daughters’ inauguration into capitalism.

Business has been steady. The Saturday-afternoon stream of patrons has nearly emptied the pitcher. The bottom of the cashier’s bowl is covered with thirty-five cents of change. With the exception of a few spills, the service has been exceptional. No complaints. Many compliments.

Part of the success, though, has been due to the marketing strategy.

Our street doesn’t get much traffic, so we did a little advertising. As my daughters painted the sign, I called several families in the neighborhood and

invited them to the grand opening of our lemonade stand. So all of our clients, thus far, had been partial.

I was proud of myself. I leaned back against the tree. Closed my eyes. Turned up the radio I had brought. And listened to the baseball game.

Then I heard an unfamiliar voice.

“I’ll have a cup of lemonade, please.”

I opened my eyes. It was a customer. A real customer. An unsolicited neighbor who had driven by, seen the sign, stopped, and ordered a drink.

*Uh-oh*, I thought. Our service was about to be tested.

Andrea, the four-year-old, grabbed a cup that had already been used.

“Get a clean cup,” I whispered.

“Oh,” she giggled, and got a clean cup.

She opened the ice bucket, looked in, and then looked back at me. “Daddy, we are out of ice.”

The patron overheard her. “That’s OK. I’ll take it warm.” She picked up the pitcher and poured. Syrupy sugar oozed out of the pitcher. “Daddy, there’s just a little bit.”

Our customer spoke again. “That’s fine. I don’t want much.”

“I hope you like it sweet,” I said under my breath.

She handed the cup to the man and he handed her a dollar. She gave it to Jenna.

Jenna turned to me. “Daddy, what do I do?” (We weren’t used to such big bills.) I stuck my hands in my pockets; they were empty.

“Uh, we don’t have any … ” I began.

“No problem,” he said, smiling. “Just keep the change.” I smiled sheepishly. He thanked the girls. Told them they were doing a great job.

Climbed back into his car. And drove off.

*Quite a transaction,* I thought. *We give him a warm, partially filled cup of lemonade syrup, and he gives us a compliment and a payment twenty times too much.*

I had set out to teach the girls about free enterprise. They ended up with a lesson on grace.

And so had I. For all the theologizing we preachers do about God's grace, the kind stranger modeled it better than the best of sermons state it.

Perhaps the story of the stranger who brought grace to our street is a good place for us to wrap up this book. For this story is the story of each of us.

Each of us has seen our ice melt in the July sun of stress. Who hasn't attempted to serve the best, only to find that the best has already been served and that the pitcher needs to be refilled? And there's not a person alive who hasn't wondered what God does when what we promise and what we produce aren't even close to being the same.

Lemonade stands and living life would be high-risk endeavors were it not for the appearance of gentle strangers on our streets. But, thank God, they come.

And, thank God, He came.

For isn't God the stranger who became our friend after looking past the dregs and into our hearts?

And aren't we not much more than surprised children, amazed that what we receive is twenty times, yea, verily a million times, more than what we ask for?

The next time your calm becomes chaos, think of that. The next time you find yourself in a storm and can't see God on the horizon, reflect on the lemonade stand. And if your walking on the water becomes floundering in the deep like Peter's did, lift your eyes and look …

A Gentle Stranger may be bringing grace to your street … to your life.

**Conclusion**

I just did what you just did. I just read this book. It goes in the mail tomorrow. The overnight-express package is on my desk, and the label is typed. The editors and their red pens are waiting. The printers and their presses are expectant. But I wasn't ready to send it off yet. So I sat on the couch with coffee, and highlighter and sipped and read and …

gratefully … smiled.

I liked it. You might find that surprising. You might assume that every writer likes what he or she writes. They should and normally do, I suppose. But I always have that lingering fear that with all the work done, I might sit down to read what I wrote … and gag.

But I didn't. I was pleased.

I smiled at the right spots and was warmed at others. It was good to visit the seashore again and see the patient Master touching the people. It was fun to read about the woman who called my bluff on the plane. It did me good to read about the lost contact lens and the recovered vision, Rickenbacker's lost crew and the mysterious sea gull, the impossible stairway and the nameless carpenter.

It was good to be reminded again that this journey is a brief one. That Jesus knows how I feel and that he'd scramble off a mountain and walk through a storm to convince me of that.

It was good to hear God's gentle thunder. I hope it has been good for you. Thanks for reading my book. I realize that it took your time and money. I hope it has been worth both.

And I hope you never forget the last Lighthouse Law: Approach life like a voyage on a schooner. Enjoy the view. Explore the vessel. Make friends with the captain. Fish a little. And then get off when you get home.

Good sailing!